

# **Trust in Police Community Support Officers**

*The views of Bangor students*

Natasha Heenan, Kelly Wilkinson, Delyth Griffiths,  
Bianca Searles, Muhanad Seloom, Rebecca Woolford,  
Caryl Williams, and Stefan Machura, *Bangor University*

## **Abstract**

Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) were introduced to assure the public that disturbances and misbehaviours are dealt with. In this paper Bangor University students showed a moderately high level of trust in PCSOs. The study identified factors which contributed to the level of student trust in PCSOs. The results emphasize what has been labelled by Tom R. Tyler as 'process-based policing': that citizens should be treated fairly by police. Students who felt they were treated impartially by PCSOs tended to trust more. Students who were informed by experiences of friends and family showed less trust indicating that these mainly reported negative encounters. Visibility of PCSOs alone is insufficient to create trust. Male students had less favourable views of PCSOs. Generally, there is a lack of accurate information about PCSOs which suggests further informative efforts by police authorities are needed.

**Key Words:** trust, Police Community Support Officers, fairness, policing, students

## **Introduction**

England and Wales currently have 16,000 Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs). They were introduced in 2002 and are key in a policy of 'reassuring' the public that unsocial behaviour and petty offenses are dealt with effectively and that their community is safe (Cooke, 2005; Cooper et al., 2006; Innes, 2007). This paper addresses public trust in PCSOs using the example of students at Bangor University. How do students experience and evaluate PCSOs? A questionnaire study forms the empirical basis of this

paper. Factors affecting trust in PCSOs were drawn from the limited number of existing studies on PCSOs. More importantly, our research is informed by general theories related to trust in state institutions and authorities. Our paper is therefore of interest beyond the circle of police specialists. The paper is the result of a research seminar for MA students in Bangor.

Across England and Wales, the function of PCSOs is fairly similar. North Wales Police (no date, p2) describes PCSOs as follows:

Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) are members of support staff who are employed, directed and managed by North Wales Police. They work to complement and support regular police officers. Their role provides a visible and accessible uniformed presence, aimed at improving the quality of life in the community and offer greater public assurance. (Our emphasis)

The exact powers PCSOs vary from area to area. North Wales Police (*ibid*, p3) outlines their powers as follows:

- Issuing fixed penalty notices (riding on footpaths; dog fouling; litter)
- Power to confiscate alcohol and tobacco
- Power to demand the name and address of a person acting in an anti-social manner
- Power of entry to save life or prevent damage
- Removal of vehicles.

As a new institution that was given only limited powers, the status of PCSOs within the society is uncertain. PCSOs are also seen sceptically within parts of the police force (Johnston, 2005). Union representatives of the police and many police officers are very critical of PCSOs. In particular, they are suspicious of the creation of a cheap alternative to the police (Cooper et al., 2006; Caless, 2007). For instance, the training of PCSOs is significantly shorter than the training of police officers (Cooper et al., 2006).

Ideally, the public should be well informed about PCSOs, yet, it has only vague knowledge (Cooper et al., 2006:33). Nevertheless, the public may be influenced by debates around PCSO training, powers and effectiveness. However, PCSOs wear a similar uniform to 'full' police officers and only on closer examination, the title 'Police Community Support Officer' can be recognised. In many ways, this similarity may lend credibility to PCSOs. Furthermore, many citizens may be generally ready to accept their authority and trust PCSOs as state servants.

### **Classic theories explaining 'trust'**

Social scientists have noticed the importance of public 'support' for state authorities and how this affects the acceptance of their decisions. For

instance, David Easton's (1965) concept of 'diffuse versus specific support' emphasized that a general endorsement of state institutions allows authorities to carry out specific policies, which are opposed individually or even by large segments of society. Easton and Dennis (1969) argued that, normally, children grow up in a society learning to trust political institutions, including the police. This was long before Max Weber (1980 [1922]) stated in his theory of dominance that modern societies legally create rights and obligations, creating 'legitimate' order and signifying 'legitimate' authorities. Bureaucracies are the typical form of social organisation and they increasingly take over responsibility for the conditions of life. Yet, Weber also noted that this often happens at the expense of individual liberties. Even more, Weber's social theory always accounted for the fact that members of the society may deviate from its rules. He defined a 'legitimate' order or rule by the 'chance' that it will be obeyed (Weber, 1980 [1922]). Other theorists have more specifically addressed the issues of crime. In the tradition of Emile Durkheim (1976), it is suggested that the society's interest in social cohesion motivates the strong response to crimes (Pepitone, 1975:198-199; Mead, 1980:262-263). It is implied that law enforcement agencies will command a high degree of public allegiance when they represent general values (Jackson and Sunshine, 2006).

### **Fair procedures and their implications**

Among the values people acquire during their socialisation are those related to fair procedures. According to the 'group value theory', procedures symbolise the values of a group or society (Lind and Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1990). Tom R. Tyler and collaborators investigated the conditions under which citizens will preserve and, indeed, built up trust in authorities, including the police. When citizens feel fairly treated by the police, they are more likely to obey police orders and trust the police (Tyler and Folger, 1980; Tyler, 1990; Tyler and Huo, 2002) Early approaches of procedural justice focused on the factor of 'voice'; that individuals want to be heard by authorities before they decide (Thibaut and Walker, 1975; Röhl and Machura, 1997). Later, Tyler and Lind (1992) formulated a 'relational model of authority in groups'. Their view was that group members wish to have a good relationship with the group authority as authorities stand for their group. Individuals employ a 'fairness heuristic' (Lind 1994a) when they determine whether or not the authority abuses its power. Is the authority benevolent, does it respect the individual as a fully entitled group member ('respect'), is it unbiased against the individual ('neutrality') and does it give the group member enough opportunity to 'voice' his or her views (Tyler, 1994; Lind, 1994a; 1994b)?

The group value theory has been successfully applied in a variety of contexts, including citizens' encounters with legal institutions (e.g. Tyler et al., 1997; Machura, 2007a; 2007b). Perhaps the most striking example is

given by Raymond Paternoster and collaborators (1997). They investigated how police intervened in cases of domestic violence. There were different ways in which the police arrested violent men, but males were less likely to re-offend against female partners when they were treated in a 'fair' manner. Tyler and Huo (2002:91) emphasise that even the 'high-risk group of young minority males' would react favourably to a police strategy of fair behaviour. A police authority which treats citizens fairly not only would have more immediate compliance with its measures but would also provide 'a form of civic education'.

In a secondary analysis based on the 2005/2006 London Metropolitan Police Public Attitude Survey, Bradford et al. (forthcoming) confirmed the basic findings of Tyler and others. They also suggested that the police should aim to influence public trust by demonstrating fair treatment to citizens. The same argument was presented by Jackson and Sunshine (2007), re-using data from a study on the fear of crime in a rural area in England. They noted that their analysis was the first evidence in Britain detailing the link between perceived police fairness and public confidence in policing (2007:229). In line with these findings, it can be expected that trust in PCSOs is correlated with experience of fair treatment from PCSOs. Compared to previous English studies, we believe the study reported in this paper is the first in Britain on a police 'type' specifically designed to also cover the criteria of fairness outlined by Tyler and Lind (1992).

### **Other factors related to trust in police**

The visibility of the police has been identified as an important factor shaping public trust (Dalglish and Myhill, 2004; Quinton and Tuffin, 2007; Bradford et al., forthcoming). In recent years, citizens have become increasingly critical of police officers infrequently passing by in cars. Rather, they wish to see police on regular foot patrol in their neighbourhoods. A certain professionalization of the police has resulted in more specialised staff working in offices. Police authorities concentrate valuable resources during peak hours of 'business' and at hot spots of criminal activity. Therefore, large areas rarely see regular police officers just patrolling on foot. PCSOs take over this traditional role of the neighbourhood 'Bobbie'.

Unless a police force is accused of wide-spread corruption (for example Machura, 1998), citizens will normally wish to see it equipped with powers that allow it to intervene effectively. Trust in PCSOs might depend on whether they have the powers people expect. However, it is likely that the public is misinformed about PCSO powers. The powers of PCSOs may be unknown to many. The public may also expect PCSOs to have powers which are reserved to the police.

Opinions can also be influenced by a variety of sources of information (Asimow et al., 2005; Machura, 2008). Friends and family may

talk about their experiences with PCSOs. Media reports can shape the understanding of PCSOs. Among students, some may be influenced by academic texts, especially if they are students of law or criminology. Consumed popular fiction can deal with PCSOs and there are some British soaps which feature PCSOs. According to Asimow et al. (2005:411):

People often fail to consider that the information extracted could be from fictitious sources. In other words, they don't always 'source discount' information derived from media, meaning that they forget that the information was derived from stories rather than real events.

As young males are most likely to cause the disturbances which PCSOs are to address, their confidence in PCSOs may be less strong. Work objectives of PCSOs, as described by North Wales Police (no date, p3), are to 'tackle anti-social behaviour', 'deter juvenile nuisance', 'handle reports of vandalism or damaged street furniture' and 'suspicious activity'. These are all social ills which are, at least stereotypically, attributed to young males.

The study presented addresses the trust students at Bangor University have in Bangor PCSOs. Bangor is a student city with over 13,500 'regular' inhabitants and a further 10,000 students (Bangor University, 2008). PCSOs in Bangor patrol areas around the city centre, the university and student halls. Contact with students may be initiated from either side. Students may just ask for advice or report an incident, alternatively they may be the ones having action taken against them. Factors like 'being male', belonging to the age group of 15 to 24 years, being employed part-time or being a student, as well as living in private rented accommodation increase the chances of having police-initiated contact (Bradford et al., forthcoming). People between 16 and 24 years of age have been found to be the age group most sceptical towards the police (Jackson and Sunshine, 2007). According to Cooper et al. (2006), PCSOs are found to spend much of their time on foot patrol dealing with 'youth nuisance'. A sample of students should give ample opportunity to investigate trust in PCSOs.

## **Hypotheses tested**

The focus of this study is on the factors influencing student trust. It aims to enhance our understanding of trust in legal authorities by identifying correlations. We test the hypothesis that student trust is influenced by a variety of sources of information. Of particular interest is positive prior experience, namely having been treated fairly by PCSOs, which may enhance trust. Male students are expected to have less trust in PCSOs than female students. The perceived visibility of PCSOs should correlate positively with trust. Belief in strong powers of PCSOs should enhance trust. The study also controls for student age and for the degree course studied.

## Methods

Data were gathered in March and April 2008 from first year students at Bangor University. The questionnaire can be found in an Appendix. Questionnaires were distributed to students in their classes. A sample of 217 was drawn from a possible 2,212 first year students. A PCSO vest and a male and female PCSO in uniform were depicted on the questionnaire to facilitate understanding. The questionnaire had mainly closed-ended questions. Questions were in part modelled after previous studies on the impact of personal experience, media and other sources of information on first year law students' views of lawyers (Asimow et al., 2005) and on German college students' views of legal authorities (Machura, 2008).

Trust was measured by asking respondents about their respect for PCSOs, perceived effectiveness of PCSOs and whether they felt comfortable to report incidents to PCSOs. It is assumed that people who trust an institution will respect it. They would also believe in its effectiveness and feel that they could rely on it to address their problems. We found these three variables to be closely interrelated (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .832$ ) and were thus combined into one measure labeled 'trust'.

## Respondent demographics

The mean age for the respondents was 20.72. Of all respondents, 27% were aged eighteen, 40% were aged nineteen, 17% were aged twenty, 7% were aged 21-25, and 4% were 26-31. The remaining 6% were older than thirty-one<sup>1</sup>. Female students constituted 53% of the respondents.

Approximately one third of the respondents studied sports science (35%), followed by 17% studying history. One fifth indicated that they were studying criminology (13%) and law (8%), while 12% were studying a foreign language. Theology students accounted for 6% of the sample, with a further 4% specifying English as their subject. The remaining 6% of respondents were studying other subject.

Of the total sample, the majority (78%) had resided in Bangor for less than a year (only 5% had lived in Bangor for more than a year). Another 17% lived outside of the city, thus may have had less contact with PCSOs in the Bangor area. However, the majority of students had a fair chance to encounter Bangor PSCOs.

## Survey results

### *Observations of PCSOs*

Approximately four out of ten students stated that PCSOs were visible in the Bangor area (4% 'highly visible' and 34% 'visible'). Another 29% indicated that PCSOs were 'less visible', while the remaining third indicated

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

either that PCSOs were ‘not visible’ (14%) or that they did not know if PCSOs were visible or not (19%).

Only 4% of respondents observed PCSOs daily. Another 30% observed PCSOs once a week in the Bangor area, while 21% observed them monthly, and 26% observed them ‘less often’, and 20% ‘never’ in the Bangor area. This measure for sightings of PCSOs will later be used to explain trust in PCSOs. Respondents were also asked to report on observed PCSO activities (Table 1). PCSOs were most often seen on foot patrol and less often seen talking to the public. Giving out information is the least frequently seen activity.

**Table 1. Observed PCSO activities, percentages**

	Very frequently	Frequently	Less frequently	Never
Foot patrol	4	34	41	21
Talking to the public	1	13	41	45
Giving out information	1	2	35	62

210 < N < 213.

#### *Perceived powers of PCSOs*

Bangor students had an inaccurate knowledge of PCSO powers (Table 2). The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate which powers they believed PCSOs to have from a list of PCSO and police powers. PCSOs cannot caution, yet 70% believed that PCSOs have this power. Approximately one third (38%) of respondents incorrectly indicated that they thought that PCSOs have the power to stop and search and 20% thought that they can hold people in custody. On the other hand, only 16% knew that PCSOs have the power to remove abandoned vehicles. Less than half the respondents were aware that PCSOs can enter into private premises to save life or prevent damage.

#### *Sources of information*

Students were given a list of possible sources of indirect information (Table 3). They were asked to indicate whether their answers to the questionnaire were influenced by these sources. Approximately two thirds of all respondents were ‘less’ or not influenced by academic texts, while 58% were ‘somewhat’, ‘quite’ or ‘very much’ influenced by TV documentaries. The latter also proved similar for TV news (63%). Of the respondents, 80% were ‘less’ or not influenced by soaps<sup>2</sup>, but six out of ten were ‘somehow’

<sup>2</sup> Further information was gathered as to which TV soaps were consumed. The questionnaire contained a choice of three shows which featured appearances of PCSOs. Approximately 20% of all respondents watched ‘The Bill’ and ‘Emmerdale’, while 30% watched ‘Hollyoaks’ (summarising the answers ‘very frequently’ and ‘frequently’). On the other hand, approximately 40% never watched ‘The Bill’ or ‘Hollyoaks’, and 50% never watched ‘Emmerdale’.

influenced by newspaper articles. Approximately one third of the respondents were ‘somehow’ influenced by websites. Importantly, 40% were in someway influenced by their family’s experiences and almost 50% by their friends’ experiences.

**Table 2. Perceived powers of PCSOs**

<b>Powers</b>	<b>%</b>
Confiscate alcohol and tobacco	69
Take details*	68
Issuing penalty **	67
Entry***	42
Removal of abandoned vehicles	16
General power to caution	70
General power to stop and search	38
Hold in custody	20

216 < N < 217.

Powers PCSOs do not have are italicised.

\* ‘Power to demand the name and address of a person acting in anti-social manner’

\*\* ‘Issuing fixed penalty notices (riding a bike on a footpath; dog fouling; litter)’

\*\*\* ‘Power of entry into private premises to save life or prevent damage’.

**Table 3. Indirect sources of information, percentages**

	<b>Very much</b>	<b>Quite</b>	<b>Some-what</b>	<b>Less</b>	<b>None</b>
Academic texts	4	11	20	22	43
TV documentaries	6	23	29	17	25
TV news	9	26	28	12	25
TV soap consumption	2	8	14	19	58
Newspapers	5	26	30	16	24
Websites	3	13	19	25	41
Family’s experiences	7	15	17	16	44
Friends’ experiences	8	25	25	12	41

195 < N < 211.

Responses to influences of TV documentaries, TV soaps and TV news were closely related and therefore combined to form one measure labelled TV consumption (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .774$ ). For the same reason, family’s and friends’ experiences were combined to form one measure labelled other’s experiences (Spearman’s rho = .75,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed,  $n = 194$ ).

*Personal experience with PCSOs*

Of all 217 respondents, 34 (16%) had personal experience with PCSOs. Table 4 indicates the nature of this experience. Of this 34, half reported that PCSOs appeared not at all biased. Additionally, 59% indicated that PCSOs ‘very much’ or ‘quite’ listened to what they said. Asked if they were treated with respect, 59% of the respondents chose answers ‘very much’ or ‘quite’.



Half felt that they ‘very much’ or ‘quite’ had enough opportunity to express their views to PCSOs (‘voice’). These items corresponded to the four criteria of fairness discussed by Lind (1994a; 1994b) and Tyler (1994): neutrality, benevolence, respect and voice. As the correlations in Table 4 show, despite low frequencies, they are significantly related to the respondents’ evaluation of the fairness of the PCSOs they have met. Of the 34 respondents, 59% felt that they were treated ‘very’ or ‘quite’ fairly.

**Table 4. Self-experience with PCSOs, percentages**

	Very much	Quite	Some-what	Less	Not at all	Don’t know	Correlation with fair treatment
<b>Fair treatment</b>	35	24	29	9	3	-	-
<b>Appeared biased</b>	6	18	15	12	50	-	-.51
<b>Listened</b>	38	21	21	6	12	3	.78
<b>Treated with respect</b>	35	24	24	12	6	-	.80
<b>Voice</b>	29	21	18	24	9	-	.80

N = 33 or 34. All correlations Spearman’s Rho, significant at  $p < .01$ , two-tailed

*Trust in PCSOs*

Returning to the full respondent sample, six out of ten students ‘very much’ or ‘quite’ respected PCSOs, and only 12% had little or no respect for PCSOs (see Table 5). However, one in four did not know how effective PCSOs are, with 18% thinking that PCSOs are ‘less’ or ‘not at all’ effective and only 29% believing that PCSOs are ‘very’ or ‘quite’ effective. Half of all respondents felt ‘very’ or ‘quite’ comfortable to report an incident to a PCSO.

**Table 5. Trust in PCSOs, percentages**

	Very much	Quite	Some-what	Less	No	Don’t know
Respect for PCSOs	28	31	25	9	3	3
Effective in role	6	23	28	10	8	25
Comfortable to report incident	23	31	20	7	12	6

161 < N < 209.

The high level of respect for PCSOs can be corroborated by the results of a scenario type question which took the situation to an extreme. Students were given the entirely hypothetical situation:

Peter (Sally) is a 17 year old PCSO who passes you on the street and notices that you are drinking alcohol. He (she) asks you to put the

alcohol in the bin as it is illegal to drink on the streets<sup>3</sup>. How likely is it that you put the alcohol in the bin?

Here, we were interested in how much the authority of a PCSO depends on the person of the individual officer. Or, in terms of Weber (1980 [1922]:675), whether the 'Amtscharisma' (the authority of the office) trumps a possible individual weakness. If a very young officer's request is obeyed, this is a strong indicator of the legitimacy of PCSOs. We also decided to give half the respondents a vignette with a female officer 'Sally' and the other half a vignette with a male officer 'Peter'. There is no significant difference between the respondents who answered the Sally questionnaires and those who did not ( $t(208) = -1.07, p = .29$ ). Generally, 26% of respondents were 'very likely' to obey the order, with 19% 'likely' and 21% 'somewhat likely' to obey. Only 18% were 'less likely' to obey and 13% indicated that they were 'not likely at all' to obey. Thus, more students were likely to react positively than negatively to the order from a PCSO younger than them.

### **Which factors influence the trust of Bangor students in PCSOs?**

A multivariate regression was conducted with trust as the dependant variable (Table 6). The following explanatory variables were entered: age, gender, law-related course, sports course, sightings of PCSOs, self experience of unbiased PCSOs, other's experiences, websites, newspapers, TV influences, academic texts and the assumed powers of PCSOs, including the powers to confiscate alcohol and tobacco, take details, issue penalties, enter, remove vehicles, and caution.

Several factors proved to be clearly non-significant; among them age, sightings of PCSOs and influences by TV, websites and newspapers. Similarly, none of the powers ascribed to PCSOs were significant. Some factors were significantly negatively related to trust. Males were more likely to report less trust in PCSOs. Students who studied a law related course including criminology had less trust in PCSOs, as had Sports students. The experiences of others also tended to influence trust negatively.

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<sup>3</sup> This is a hypothetical situation and, we admit, this does not reflect the precise wording of the law on street drinking (see e.g. the Confiscation of Alcohol (Young Persons) Act 1997, and the Licensing Act 2003).

**Table 6. Linear regression for trust in PCSOs**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Age	.01	.883
Male student#	.25***	.007
Law related course degree#	.28***	.006
Sport student#	.20**	.041
Sightings of PCSOs	.13	.143
Self-experience of unbiased PCSOs#	-.19**	.034
Other's experiences	-.25**	.013
Websites	.04	.701
Newspapers	.03	.837
TV influences	-.12	.319
Academic texts	.33***	.002
Power to confiscate#	.10	.256
Power to take details#	-.16*	.079
Power to issue penalties#	-.17*	.058
Power of entry#	-.04	.674
Remove vehicles#	.13	.137
Power to caution#	-.02	.817
Power to stop and search#	-.17*	.062
Power to hold in custody#	-.02	.854

N = 121, multivariate regression,  $R^2 = .355$

# Dummy coding: negative values indicate higher trust

'Self-experienced unbiased PCSOs': '1' = 'not at all biased'

\*  $p < .10$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .01$

Powers PCSOs do not have are italicised.

Other factors were significantly positively related to trust. First year students who reported that they were influenced by academic texts had greater trust in PCSOs. Those who had themselves experienced unbiased PCSOs in a past encounter trusted them more.

Most of these factors cannot be influenced by the individual PCSO who meets students in the streets and shops of Bangor. The exception is the experience of unbiased PCSOs which forms one of the criteria for fairness. This finding motivates a last look at how perceived fairness relates to opinions of PCSOs. Table 7 shows bivariate correlations. To be treated with respect and to be listened to strongly correlated with the three individual measures for trust and they correlated strongly with the trust index. They were also significantly related to whether students would follow a request by a 17-year old PCSO.

**Table 7. Self-experience with PCSOs, percentages**

	Respect for PCSOs	PCSOs effective	Comfortable to report	Trust index	Obey young PCSO
Unbiased	.29*	.33*	.27	.29	.25
Listened	.61***	.47***	.45***	.61***	.35**
Treated with respect	.47***	.43**	.49***	.58***	.41**
Voice	.35**	.27	.47***	.42*	.30

30 < N < 34, correlations are Spearman's Rho, except 'trust index': Pearson's r  
\* p < .10, \*\* p < .05, \*\*\* p < .01, two-tailed.

## Discussion

To summarise, Bangor students showed a moderately high level of trust in PCSOs. However, students often had doubts about the effectiveness of PCSOs and they do not know much about the powers of PCSOs. Students who indicated acquiring their knowledge on PCSOs from academic books exhibited more trust in PCSOs. This indicates one possible way in which to improve the standing of PCSOs: better information. Quality of information has been found to be related to trust in police more broadly (Bradford et al., forthcoming).

Other ways to enhance trust in PCSOs are suggested by the analysis. Fair and unbiased behaviour is important to how authorities, among them the police, are evaluated by citizens. Students who had prior experience with PCSOs showed more trust when they felt that they had been treated without bias. On the one hand, our findings reinforce theories of procedural fairness. On the other hand, they indicate that the training and the daily demeanour of PCSOs should be sensible to issues of fairness. It suggests a policy of 'process-based policing' amounting to 'a form of civic education' because individuals will generalise from experience with individual officers (Tyler and Huo, 2002:xiv-xv). Experiments have shown that fair behaviour can be trained (Tausch and Langer, 1971; Tausch et al., 1975).

Experiences with Bangor PCSOs tended to be positive for students. However, experiences shared by others with the respondents diminished trust in PCSOs. This suggests that the respondents' friends and family members mainly revealed and discussed negative experiences. Again, it seems important for PCSOs to treat citizens fairly. It also suggests that incidents of bad treatment can be very detrimental to the standing of PCSOs in the Bangor community and beyond.

In many respects, males differed from females. There were fewer males than females in most courses with the exceptions of Sports, Music and History. A clear divide was found between male and female students, as male students have significantly less trust in PCSOs. Males not only reported seeing PCSOs more frequently ( $t(213) = 2.22, p < .05$ ), but they also indicated that they have less respect ( $t(207) = -4.32, p < .001$ ), view

PCSOs as less effective ( $t(159) = -3.64, p < .001$ ) and would feel less comfortable reporting incidents to PCSOs ( $t(202) = -2.07, p < .05$ ).

Generally in Britain, young males are more often drawn in the criminal justice system than females. In addition, heavy alcohol consumption and accompanying public misbehaviour are more typical for young men than women. To address problems like these is a primary task of PCSOs. Police authorities perhaps should develop an information campaign that specifically targets young males to explain the work of PCSOs to them. In addition, a markedly fair interference from PCSOs that avoids disrespectful treatment of difficult young people will again be important.

Students of Law, Criminology and Sports Science were found to have a less positive view of PCSOs. Perhaps, it is more than a cliché that Sports students tend to spend more time going out into the city centre? This lifestyle may affect the relationship with a public service that polices the streets. Sports students may also feel more confident to tackle situations without assistance. As the student respondents were in their first year, the lower opinions of students from law-related courses does not necessarily imply a better knowledge of PCSOs. There may be a degree of prejudice against what is not clearly a fully equipped police officer.

Sightings of PCSOs were not decisive for trust in PCSOs when compared to other factors. This does not render visibility of PCSOs negligible. Rather, it suggests that visibility on its own is worthless without having high standards for police action. The underlying importance in regards to the visibility of uniformed officers is 'that they actually 'engage' with the community' (Cooke, 2005:236) (similarly Johnston, 2005; Innes, 2007). Again, the quality of interaction is highlighted.

The reported findings regarding PCSOs in Bangor have some limitations. Attitudes towards the Police more broadly were not accounted for. Further research should look at a possible transference of experience and opinion, affecting how respondents view PCSOs. Bangor students are ethnically less diverse than students in other parts of Britain, most certainly less so than in larger cities like London or Birmingham. Yet it can be argued that the main findings are basic in nature and could to apply to PCSOs and police generally.

Beyond that, the findings presented are relevant for those who study the responses of citizens to state authorities. The paper underlines the importance of fair treatment by government agents generally, not only police. But there is more. It has been generally accepted, that the media often draw a negative picture of state authorities. This study now suggests that citizens often tell each other about negative experiences and that these decisively form opinions on public authorities. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to avoid unnecessary burdens for citizens including unfair treatment by the personnel representing the state.

## Endnote: Research seminar with MA students

This final section of the paper addresses the way this research was conducted by MA students. In the seminar Comparative Criminological Research at Bangor University, students agreed to conduct an empirical project rather than just read literature about methodology and criminological studies. A basis for this was laid by another module, The Research Process, starting in semester one of the MA studies which continued to run simultaneously with Comparative Criminological Research during the second semester. The MA students formed a good group, no student was excluded and motivation was generally high. Students came from criminology, law, linguistics and psychology backgrounds, combining skills like legal research and statistical analysis. To further enhance the commitment of the group, the seminar group was free to choose its topic of research after the lecturer suggested a direction and introduced studies of manageable size. The students decided to address the topic of knowledge of, and opinion on, PCSOs. The next seminar sessions dealt with preparing the ground for the field phase. Students had to identify relevant literature and to formulate hypotheses, informed by social science theory, to find information about PCSOs in Bangor, and to identify the targeted respondents. Students were also involved in sampling, data entry and statistical analyses. Large parts of the activity were self-organized by the students with the lecturer following an arms-length approach. The prospect of producing original data, of presenting the results at the British Society of Criminology conference in Huddersfield (July 2008) and of finally publishing the results in a journal served as further motivation for the group. Students were evaluated by giving poster presentations in three groups on the theory and hypotheses of this research, on methods applied and on the results. Looking back, a good balance of group work and individual motivation proved decisive.

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**NATASHA HEENAN, KELLY WILKINSON, DELYTH GRIFFITHS, BIANCA SEARLES, MUHANAD SELOOM, REBECCA WOOLFORD and CARYL WILLIAMS** were MA students of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Bangor University, School of Social Sciences.

**STEFAN MACHURA** is Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice at the School of Social Sciences, Bangor University.

## Appendix: Questionnaire

**SURVEY OF OPINIONS ABOUT POLICE COMMUNITY SUPPORT OFFICERS  
WITHIN THE BANGOR AREA**

This survey is voluntary and anonymous. Your answers will be combined with others and not individually identified. You can decline to answer any question or all of the questions. Please tick the appropriate response. Thank you very much for answering!

- A.1 What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
- A.2 What is your gender? Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_
- A.3 What degree course are you doing? \_\_\_\_\_
- A.4 How long have you lived in Bangor?
- Less than a year \_\_\_\_\_
- A year \_\_\_\_\_
- More than a year \_\_\_\_\_
- I live outside Bangor \_\_\_\_\_

The next three questions will be on the visibility of the Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) in the Bangor area. Their typical uniform is shown on the pictures above.

- B.1 Are PCSOs visible in Bangor?
- |                |         |              |             |            |
|----------------|---------|--------------|-------------|------------|
| Highly visible | Visible | Less visible | Not visible | Don't know |
| _____          | _____   | _____        | _____       | _____      |

- B.2 How often do you see PCSOs?

- Daily \_\_\_\_\_
- Once a week \_\_\_\_\_
- Once a month \_\_\_\_\_
- Less often \_\_\_\_\_
- Never \_\_\_\_\_

- B.3 How often do you see PCSOs performing the following activities?

	Very frequently	Frequently	Less frequently	Never
Foot patrol	_____	_____	_____	_____
Talking to the public	_____	_____	_____	_____
Giving out information	_____	_____	_____	_____

What do you think about Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs)?

- | C.1  | Very<br>much | Quite | Some-<br>what | Less  | No/<br>Not | Don't<br>know |
|--|--------------|-------|---------------|-------|------------|---------------|
| Do you have respect for PCSOs?                                 | _____        | _____ | _____         | _____ | _____      | _____         |
| Are PCSOs effective in their role?                             | _____        | _____ | _____         | _____ | _____      | _____         |
| Would you feel comfortable reporting an incident to a PCSO(s)? | _____        | _____ | _____         | _____ | _____      | _____         |

C.2 Sally is a 17 year old PCSO who passes you on the street and notices that you are drinking alcohol. He (she) asks you to put the alcohol in the bin as it is illegal to drink on the streets. How likely is it that you put the alcohol in the bin?

Very likely   LikelY   Somewhat likelY   Less likelY   Not likelY at all   Don't Know  
 \_\_\_\_\_

C.3 Which of the following powers do you think PCSOs have? (Tick as appropriate)

- Issuing fixed penalty notices (riding a bike on a footpath; dog fouling; litter)
- Power to confiscate alcohol and tobacco
- General power to caution
- Power to demand the name and address of a person acting in anti-social manner
- Power of entry into private premises to save life or prevent damage
- Removal of abandoned vehicles
- Power to hold someone in custody
- General power to stop and search

Experience

D.1 In assessing the above questions how much were you influenced by:

	Very much	Quite	Somewhat	Less	None
Academic texts	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
TV documentaries	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
TV news	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Soaps	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Newspaper articles	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Websites	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Experience of family	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Experience of friends	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Other please state _____					

D.2 Have you watched any of the following TV programs?

	Very frequently	Frequently	Less frequently	Never
The Bill	_____	_____	_____	_____
Hollyoaks	_____	_____	_____	_____
Emmerdale	_____	_____	_____	_____

E. Have you had personal experience[s] with PCSOs? For example having reported an incident, or being addressed by them? (Circle a or b as appropriate)

- a- Yes - please answer questions 1 to 5.
- b- No - please skip questions 1 to 5.

	Very	Quite	Some- what	Less	Not at all	Don't know
1. How fair were you treated by the PCSOs?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. Did the officers appear biased?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Did they listen to what you said?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. Did they treat you with respect?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
5. Did you have enough opportunity to discuss your views?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Thank you very much!**