

## In Praise of Fire Brigade Policing: Challenging the Police Role

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### Premise for “What if...?” pamphlet series

In both popular and police culture the role of the police has always been seen in narrow crime control terms. The cops are there to catch robbers, the more the merrier. But until fairly recently this conception was challenged by official designations of the police role (from Peel to Scarman), as well as by many senior officers and researchers. These voices argued for a much wider conceptualisation of police responsibilities in relation to crime, as well as noting the much broader social role of the police. In popular culture this can be dubbed the Dirty Harry vs. Dixon debate, and until the last two decades it was active and vigorous – as shown for example by the 1990 ‘Operational Policing Review’ conducted by the three staff associations. But since then (starting with the 1993 White Paper *Police Reform* and the legislative and managerial changes flowing from it) the crime control conception of the police role has achieved almost complete hegemony. This is a crucial component of the general domination of the criminal justice policy agenda by the politics of law and order, reflecting the neoliberal consensus of the last two decades.

Fire-brigade policing was originally coined in the 1970s as a critical term, regretting that the transformation through technology of the police response to calls for service had supposedly distanced them from the public. This paper claims that the pejorative usage of ‘fire-brigade policing’ is largely misplaced. The crucial core role of the police is as an emergency service, responding to a sea of urgent troubles of which crime is an important part but far from the whole story. This paper argues for a rediscovery of the social role of policing, beyond crime control, and a frank recognition that they are primarily there as a first line response to people in distress. Their performance should not be judged in terms of the overall crime rate, on which they can have only a marginal impact. Nor should crime detection be a crucial indicator of policing, as it is more a function of crime levels than the quality of investigations. Managerial accountability and assessment require the much more difficult task of assessing the *quality* of emergency service delivery.