

You're on your own, Officer

My morning shift begins at 07:00hrs, with a briefing from the sergeant.

This is called a parade, like they used to have in *Hill Street Blues*, where the old boy would end with a fatherly, 'Be careful out there'.

So what do you imagine our morning parades are like?

Serried ranks of stern-faced constables wearing dark blue capes and carrying truncheons?

Eager hordes of law enforcement freaks champing at the bit to get out there and kick illegal butt?

Two dozen Robocops, checking their CS gas and body armour and practising their take-down techniques?

Er, not exactly.

The other day I turned up on my own to the morning parade.

I don't mean I had got the wrong room, or turned up late after everyone had gone.

I mean I was the only uniformed officer on duty that day, in a town of about 60,000 people.

Let me just spell that out again: the population of the town in which I work is about 60,000, and I was the **ONLY UNIFORMED OFFICER ON DUTY AT THAT POINT**.

True, there were other uniformed officers *inside* the police station; there were even a few officers on duty who were not wearing a uniform. But as for officers, in uniform, on duty and able to deploy to a call from a member of the public, there was only me.

The 'thin blue line' had become a very insignificant dot.

Even at full strength, we're never going to be particularly terrifying to criminals: there should have been three others, not including the sergeant. But one was sick, one was on a course and the other was due at court later that day.

I have always thought the public sector is slightly top heavy, on the admin side, so I checked the car park at about 10:00hrs. Sure enough, it was packed.

Our staffing levels are closely controlled and monitored, and we have whole departments within the force geared to ensuring that the right balance of uniformed officers and civilian staff are employed. Staffing is the subject of strategy meetings at the highest level. In fact, the whole issue is so important it cannot be left up to the minds of mere mortals. No, we have a computer system which plans and manages ‘human resources’ (people). It’s called HRMS, or Human Resource Management System. I don’t think it works very well.

It is a mantra of senior management in the Police Service and at the Home Office that ‘ordinary people’ overestimate the volume of crime. ‘Ordinary people cannot be expected to know the realities of crime and how it can be prevented,’ runs the argument. ‘Furthermore, they cannot interpret the statistics the way we can. If they could, they would be able to see that crime was actually going down, not up.’

I like to ask ordinary people about how much crime they think there is, and perhaps they do overestimate it.

The thing is, I often ask them to estimate the number of officers on duty, too, and they also overestimate that. Usually by a factor of ten.

Oh M G! (Geddit?)

I had barely sat down yesterday before I was sent to a criminal damage where a helpful local youth was in the process of remodelling someone else’s property – from ‘fence’ to ‘kindling’, as it happened.

As luck would have it, the offender was identified by two witnesses. He was loitering nearby, drinking cheap lager and fiddling with his chains. At 16:06hrs, I arrested and cautioned him. Ignoring the drive out to the address, dealing with the crime had taken me about a minute so far.

Fairly straightforward, yes? A fence has been smashed to pieces, we’ve got the guilty party and, very shortly, I can be back out on the streets looking for muggers and burglars and generally waging the war on crime.

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Er, not quite.

Taking the suspect down to the police station and booking him into custody only took half an hour, because there wasn't a queue.

Then I returned to the address to speak to a couple of witnesses and take their statements.

One of them was the old man to whom the fence belonged. He was close to tears.

'The thing is, officer,' he said. 'Him and his mates are always hanging around and sitting on our wall. I wouldn't mind that so much, but their language is appalling and I don't want my wife to have to listen to it at her time of life. And they leave their beer cans and fag packets and such. And if you ask them to keep the noise down they just swear at you. That lad and his mate were rolling around on our lawn fighting and laughing and squashing all the flowers. When I asked them to stop it they threatened me and he started smashing the fence up. I can't understand it.'

'Yes, it is a tough one, sir,' I said.

'What I want to know is, why aren't they at work or school or something?' he said. 'I probably shouldn't have called you. They'll only come back and next time it'll be worse.'

I reflected on this for a moment. He was probably right. Half a century ago, this sort of mindless, aggressive criminal damage rarely happened, and certainly not in broad daylight in front of witnesses. Can it possibly be that the perpetrators don't fear the forces of law and order any more?

'Well,' I said. 'If they do come back, call us straight away.'

It wasn't much, but it was the best I could do.

I'd spent a couple of hours on the statements and a total, so far, of two hours and 31 minutes on this matter.

Back at the nick, I spent an hour waiting for the defence solicitor (of whom, more later) to turn up, and a further hour making disclosure (in which we tell the defence what evidence we have) to said lawyer and interviewing the suspect. He denied everything, so I then wrote a report (called an MG3) to the Crown Prosecution Service (the CPS, which decides on whether suspects will be charged) and faxed them all the relevant documentation. After an hour of preparation, faxing and consulting I was told to charge the youth with criminal damage to the fence.

Charging, fingerprinting, photographing and DNAing the suspect took a further 45 minutes.

Thus far, I'd spent about five hours on the crime, plus a bit of getting to and from the scene.

The whole enquiry was concluded by about 21:30hrs.

I had something to eat and, at 22:15hrs, I began the file.

ACPO (the Association of Chief Police Officers) says this ought to take between four and six hours, which is a rather worrying admission when you think about it. Fortunately for you, the taxpayer (and me), I have the whole process down to about two hours.

A 'file' is a collection of paperwork that consists of all the evidence against the accused, as well as a summary of the case against him. All the evidence is recorded on a series of forms called MG forms (MG standing for 'Manual of Guidance'). The theory is that all the evidence for all cases comes in the same format so it is easy for the CPS to understand and work through them.

I had to produce a 'Full File' in the anticipation of a Not Guilty plea by the accused. The file preparation consists of the following (NB, all forms are usually handwritten):

1. FCS (File cover sheet containing the offence outline and details of the offender, the offence and the court date).
2. MG1 (Another cover sheet for the CPS with offender details on).
3. MG3 (The report I prepared for the CPS earlier).
4. MG4 (The charge sheet).
5. MG5 (Details of the case against the offender, running to about three A4 sheets).
6. MG6 (Another summary sheet outlining any details you want to keep from the defence).
7. MG6C (Unused, non-sensitive material eg serial printouts, rough notes, etc).
8. MG6D (Unused, sensitive material eg anything where we might be using police informants, hidden cameras, that kind of thing).
9. MG6E (Anything that may damage the prosecution case).
10. MG11 (Witness statements and IP statements, all of which are written by the officer and are often several pages long; also the officer's arrest statement).
11. MG15 (Summary of what was said on interview).

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As well as that, I also had to prepare the interview tapes for transcribing, and put all of the paperwork generated in the course of the enquiry together in a nice, neat folder.

I ended up with a stack of handwritten forms about half an inch thick, all of which I pinned together and handed to a supervisor for checking before they were sent off to the CPS.

I arrested my suspect at 16:06 hrs and at 00:30hrs this morning, I celebrated by going for a quick walk around the town centre, before booking off duty.

I'd spent approximately half an hour outside the police station actually 'policing'.

Do you want your tax spent paying me to spend an entire shift dealing with one fence-wrecking moron, or would you rather we could spend a little less time on paperwork and a bit more walking the streets?

I know that's not the sort of question the police normally ask people, but I thought you might like to think about it.

F*ck the po-lice, f*ck the po-lice

I have lately (not by choice) been listening to a lot of 'gangsta-rap', a genre of music imported from America where it is, I'm told, created by rich black people for consumption by middle-class white youngsters.

Most gangsta rap seems to revolve around killing policemen, being in jail and having penetrative sex with 'hose'. It's all a bit of a mystery to me, and the method of its delivery (shouting defiantly, over an insistent drum beat) serves only to make it more indecipherable.

Quite what idle youths in the Newtown council estates have in common with the homies of South Central LA is a mystery to me – I've been there, and to other ghettos, and they're quite, quite different from our little town – but it is becoming increasingly common for me to have to conduct stop-searches to the tune of 'Die, motherf*cker, die.'

I suspect that children listen to this music because they like the tune, and find the idea of being rich and famous appealing. It doesn't appeal to us all, though (the music, that is).

The other evening, a lad called Wayne was playing gangsta rap very loudly. Unfortunately, he was in his K-registered Rover 214 outside the corner shop at the time, and not everyone was enjoying it, especially those people living nearby who were trying to get their babies and young children to sleep. Pulling up alongside him, I suggested that the ladies in the area might not appreciate hearing the controversial views of the artist on subjects such as domestic violence, drive-bys and 'bitches'. I might as well have been talking in Chinese.

'Eh?' said Wayne, the gaggle of teenage homies gathered around his car regarding me with deep suspicion. 'Whayouonabout?'

'I'm not sure everyone wants to hear that music, certainly not that loudly,' I explained.

'Yerwah?' he said, eyes slightly glazed.

'Turn that bloody racket off,' I said. 'Now.'

Grumbling, he turned it down.

'Off!'

He turned it off. 'Why you always be hasslin' de yoot like dis?' he said, though he isn't Jamaican and, in fact, grew up in a rural English village a few miles out of town. 'Man, it's like a f*ckin' po-lice state.'

'More than you know, Wayne,' I replied. I have long-since given up lecturing the young about the errors of their ways but that never seems to stop them lecturing me about the hardships of living in the 'ghetto', where life is made so hard for them because of the constant interruptions of 'the man'.

'But, be that as it may, if you swear again I'm going to have to lock you up.'

I drove away. I knew he'd turn it on again as soon as I was out of sight, so I did a u-turn 250 yards away.

Sure enough, when I returned, Wayne had the racket up to full blast again.

I warned him under Section 5 of the Public Order Act and sent him on his way.

Sho nuff whupped him upside the ass.

Violence

The most predictable thing about being involved in violent incidents is that they are completely unpredictable.

If I respond to a report of thirty youths fighting in the street with baseball bats, I can be fairly certain that on my arrival they will have dispersed and that a subsequent area search will prove negative.

On the other hand, if the local library assistant rings up to report a problem customer returning a book late, you just know that you're going to end up rolling around on the floor somewhere between Late Medieval History and Local Walks.

I'd like to be able to say that Newtown's A&E unit is just the kind of place where you wouldn't expect there to be much fighting, but the fact that the receptionist has to sit behind a protective glass screen is a bit of a giveaway. Paul and I went there the other day to a call of a male shouting and being disruptive. By the time we arrived, he was staging a one-man protest against the NHS by refusing to get off a stretcher and shouting about his treatment.

I began negotiations. 'Do you want to get off that trolley?' I said.

'No, I f*cking don't,' he replied, with some venom. 'I've got a right to be here.'

Paul took a firm grip of his arm and attempted to pull him from the trolley. He resisted, and I began to apply my boot to his hand, in a repeated downward motion, to persuade him to release hospital property (at least, that's what it says in my statement).

As we dragged him out of the hospital, he maintained his grip on the trolley with one hand and tried to grab my leg with the other. Paul also employed the 'boot method' to subdue the man and eventually we got him handcuffed and in the car, where he began to headbutt the window. The fool.

I've been to a few fights and met a few violent people, but most of the time the heat has gone out of the situation prior to my arrival and I'm left with a few bruised and battered victims who are really drunk and want something done. 'His name's John, or something. I think he plays in the same football team as my cousin. If you don't do something, I will. What do you mean, calm down? How can I calm

down? I've been hit in the face. Can't you f*cking see? I want him f*cking done!

Drunk people: that's what the police are here for, after all.

The word 'violence' conjures up disturbing images for people not used to calling the police.

For many people who do regularly call the police, though, the word 'violence' is just difficult to spell.

The trivial nature of most reports of violence has to be seen to be believed. They are a litany of failed relationships, petty neighbour disputes and outbursts of anger, which most people would not bother with but which, in the topsy-turvy world of police bureaucracy and the underclass, create trivial crimes to be detected.

Trivial, and also wholly predictable.

It's impossible for the individual officer to suggest that everyone calm down and take a rational approach; why bother when shouting and screaming has achieved so much already?

They're not always trivial, of course. Sometimes the 30 youths are still going strong when we arrive, which is mildly unsettling. It all kicked off in a big way in town at the weekend. We had a proper punch up, with batons drawn, heads cracked and a few people left nursing bruises and bloody noses on both sides of the argument.

It started with a call to one of our rougher pubs. 'Can patrols attend the King's Head. Reports of twenty people fighting in the car park. No weapons seen.'

I was one of the last there, so didn't see the worst of it. Other patrols had already separated the combatants into 'probably guilty' and 'probably innocent' and the two groups were being held apart by bobbies as they spat and swore at each other (the yobs, not the bobbies).

Several of them were arrested and I was asked to assist a colleague called Karen with one lucky drunk. Karen gave him his one opportunity to come quietly, but he blew it and she and I leapt on him with another couple of officers. I know it sounds like overkill, but it's hard to subdue a drunken, violent man unless you can really go to town on him which we're not allowed to do. We turned him onto his front, pulled his hands behind his back and cuffed him in what I can only describe as the 'Home Office-approved manner'. Textbook, it was. He was then thrown in the cage in the back of the van.

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By the time he got out at the other end, the injuries he had sustained in the fight and the gravel from the car park had combined to make him look like Freddy Krueger.

‘I’ve been beaten up by these coppers,’ he told the desk sergeant.

‘Really, sir?’ said the sergeant. ‘Reason for arrest, please Karen?’

‘Hang about,’ said the man. ‘I’ve been f*cking beaten up by your coppers, I said. What are you going to do about it?’

The sergeant sighed and put down his pen. ‘Let me guess,’ he said. ‘Did they ask you if you’d get in the van?’

‘Yes.’

‘And did you refuse?’

‘Yes.’

‘So they made you get in the van, did they?’

‘Yes.’

‘I see. Karen, reason for arrest please?’

Police attendance at violent incidents like this often results in allegations of police brutality.

These are vigorously investigated and make for good news pictures if there is CCTV of the incident.

I am usually suspicious of such allegations. This isn’t because I don’t believe it goes on; I’m sure it must, occasionally, and, God knows, a saint would be tempted sometimes. But, hand on heart, I have never overstepped the line myself, or even come close to doing so. No, my suspicions are raised because there is a widespread belief amongst the criminal classes that the police *do* beat people up all the time, and that we *like* doing so. I think it has become a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy in their minds. Some thug called Tony is arrested on a night out. He’s drunk, he struggles, two officers use a bit of force to cuff him and place him in the van. This, to Tony, is ‘police brutality’ (I’d like Tony and some of our local idiots to go on holiday to Colombia, say, and swagger down a local High Street shouting the odds and attacking the police; that would give them a bit of perspective).

The fact is that most police officers *hate* getting involved in violence. Many are women (and therefore smaller than most of their potential adversaries). Others are terribly unfit: the most exercise the average officer gets is the walk from the car to the police station. Of the rest, most are just ordinary blokes who are mostly interested in

getting home on time. They certainly don't want to lose their pension for clocking some halfwit. Would you?

That leaves about two psychopathic nutters in the whole of the UK's police strength. If you find out who and where they are, let me know.

I don't like fighting. I especially don't like fighting people who are bigger and stronger than me.

Worst of all, though, is fighting with girls.

My natural instinct, as an unreformed caveman, is to protect females. Ha, ha. Given a few Vodka Red Bulls and an errant boyfriend, the average Lycra-clad chav-woman will take on a full shift of officers, and possibly win.

Now that, dear reader, looks good on CCTV.

A land fit for criminals

I'm sure lots of you, like me, are kept awake at night by the idea that some of our prisons are overcrowded. It's certainly been worrying Lord Chief Justice Phillips of Worth Matravers lately.

Recently, his Lordship suggested that offenders should only be sent to jail 'as a last resort' and that they should really be rehabilitated in the community.

I think they should be rehabilitated *chez* Phillips, where Lady Phillips can keep an eye on the family silver and Lord Phillips can develop a better understanding of what persistent acquisitive criminals are really like.

To understand how bad things really are, I recommend reading *A Land Fit For Criminals* by David Fraser. Fraser is a former probation officer who's had personal experience of dealing with a large number of criminals. His basic thesis is that, in order fully to protect the public, we need to lock up a minimum of 225,000 people (the current maximum is 80,000) and we need a police force of about four times the size that it is now. I disagree with the latter part of that thesis, for reasons I'll explain later, but I'm onside with the first part.

He firmly believes that prison works, and that all attempts to reform criminals in the community are dangerous experiments which put the public at risk. Not only that, community service doesn't work:

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people don't turn up and, when they do, they don't really do what they're supposed to do. Jail, on the other hand, is a cast-iron guarantee that the public, and their property, are safe from criminals. While they're inside they can get certificates in all sorts of things from woodwork to 'Enhanced Thinking' (really), but they can't creep into your house and steal your TV.

It's a fact, despite what LCJ Phillips says or thinks, that jailing an eighteen year old for six to twelve years for his third burglary dwelling would ensure the public were protected from literally hundreds of offences.

Fraser reserves special criticism for the probation service, which he says is dedicated to keeping criminals out of jail, and for the civil servants who have consistently viewed jail as counterproductive. He leans rather too much on the fact that most people don't report crime to the police, something that's undoubtedly true but at the same time detracts from the sound arguments in the rest of the book, but it's a recommended read, for all that.

Back to *chez* Phillips. I've no idea where the LCJ's houses are (he's probably got several), or what they're like, but I'll hazard a guess. They will be nice, big pads in low crime areas. They will have walls around them and plenty of open ground that burglars have to cross before they get to the alarmed and well-made windows. He'll probably have a dog or two, and possibly a live-in housekeeper. The local nick will know exactly where he is and they will be on tenterhooks in case they get a call to get out there (if he hasn't got a panic button or some sort of direct comm-link). His neighbours will be charming people with diverse interests, large cars and lots of antique furniture. If he encounters muggers, burglars or general ne'er-do-wells (outside his professional life) it will only be because of extreme carelessness on his part. He won't be offered out in the back garden of the King's Head, after drinking nine pints of Stella, because he brushed someone's arm.

Now, ask yourself: when it comes to deciding on how criminals should be dealt with, is Lord Chief Justice Phillips of Worth Matravers a chap you trust?

Jumps from tall buildings

As I was coming to the end of the writing of this book, the case of Barry Chambers hit the papers like manna from Heaven. It was like manna from Heaven because it revealed, in ways more amusing and unlikely than a mere satirist ever could, the depths of the madness to which Britain is now sinking.

Chambers stole a car. He was chased between two towns by police until he came to a halt by a convenient drainpipe which he promptly shinned up.

He spent the next 20 hours on a rooftop, hurling insults and bricks and slates at the police as they wrung their hands and hopped from foot to foot down below, begging him to come down, please, and stop being so silly, we're sure we can sort this out.

Halfway through all this, Barry got hungry and told the police he wanted a Kentucky Fried Chicken lunch. Off hared a bobby (this is the sort of job which would have been given to me if the incident had been on us), returning half an hour later with a bargain bucket and a bottle of Pepsi.

'That bottle's too small,' said Barry. 'Get me another, bigger one. And some fags, while you're at it.'

Off hared the bobby again.

Meanwhile, according to press reports, 60 police officers were milling around, 'many with dogs' (presumably plenty without dogs, too; what were the dogless ones doing?) and riot shields to stop themselves getting hit with bricks, as 'highly trained negotiators' tried to talk Barry down.

As an aside, I love the phrase 'highly trained negotiators'. It's a bit like 'bomb disposal expert', which implies that there are loads of 'bomb disposal amateurs' who do a bit of bomb disposal in their spare time. Just little bombs, you understand; the experts are called in for all the really big or complicated ones. (I'm not knocking negotiators, by the way. I'd certainly be no good at negotiation, but then there's not a lot of call for it round our way. From time to time, we do get people threatening to kill themselves, but it's always in a very half-hearted sort of fashion. This is reflected in the demise of the suicide note which, these days, has been superseded by the pre-suicide txt msg:

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‘Im goin 2 top myslf m8’. I don’t know about you, but I don’t think it quite has the same ring to it. Actual suicide is, mercifully, rare, unlike para-suicide which is so common I’m surprised it hasn’t got its own form: *What’s your preferred method of not-really-committing suicide – pills/drink/slashed wrists/jumping off tall buildings. Delete as appropriate. You may select more than one item from the list.*)

Anyway. Where was I?

Eventually, after his chicken, a few more insults and a bit of a kip, Barry came down and was led away.

Well. What are we to make of all that?

My first thought was, *What on earth were they doing giving him cigarettes and KFC? Don’t they know that’s bad for your health? He could sue.*

The last word on the affair goes to *Sun* letter writer Spencer Arnott, from Holmer Green, Bucks.

‘I THOUGHT I’d heard and seen it all,’ he writes. ‘Then Barry Chambers spent all day on a rooftop lobbing bricks at the police while they sent up to him a KFC bucket and some fags. A police marksman should have shot him in the legs.’

Spencer, your application form for the job of ‘Highly trained and experienced negotiator’ is in the post.

Update: Barry was jailed for three years and nine months, which is actually a bit of a result. Or would be if he served it all.

Hiding my skills under a bushel

Talking of negotiation, I was recently told to check on the welfare of a known manic depressive who had threatened to kill himself.

I knocked on the door.

‘Who is it?’ he shouted.

‘It’s the police!’ I shouted in return.

‘F*ck off, I’ve got a gun!’ he shouted again.

‘F*ck off yourself, Sid,’ I shouted back. ‘You haven’t got a gun, you’re pissed, and if you don’t open this f*cking door right now, I’ll break the f*cker down.’

It all ended happily enough, with Sid at the local hospital and me away on time.

Another whose negotiating skills left a lot to be desired was 39-year-old Welshman Dominic Peck. I wasn't involved in this incident, and I'll regret that till the day I die. This may be the funniest story ever.

Peck, a 39-year-old labourer from Barry in Wales, had been a naughty boy and was banned from the area under a restraining order. However, he decided to ignore the order and held a little drinks party for a few friends in a flat in the town.

Eventually, there were just three of them left: Peck, another man and a woman, one Amanda Lacey.

They were settling into a hazy Sunday morning of cider and sherry, as you do, when there was a bang at the door.

'It was the police,' explained Ms Lacey. 'They were shouting, "C'mon Dom, open up we know you're in there". I think they'd come because he'd breached the order.

'Well, he turned to me and winked before shouting back, "F*ck off, I've got a gun and a hostage!" Apparently, he also said he was holding a knife to my throat and had a Glock 9mm pistol and a shotgun, but I can't remember him saying any of that. He certainly never threatened me with any knife. He wasn't like that. He was a big bloke who could look intimidating but he was a friendly giant, really.

'He was only joking – we were all hammered to be honest.'

They settled back to watching the telly, presumably thinking the police would shrug their shoulders and leave.

After half an hour or so, Amanda got up and happened to look out of the window.

'I saw they'd cordoned off the street,' she said. 'There were armed officers in all the neighbours' gardens with their guns pointing at the window. At that point the other guy with us panicked, jumped out the window and did a runner. What we didn't know was that he had the keys on him and the front door was deadlocked – we were locked in. For some reason, I never thought much of it.'

She mentioned it to Dom, but he just shrugged and, like anyone would, they went back to the telly and the cider (they got through nine litres of the stuff, Amanda later said, which is impressive on its own).

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And the stand-off continued: vanloads of armed police outside, the couple inside blithely channel-hopping and gargling with Strongbow.

At about 6pm, having been drinking all day, a now very much the worse-for-wear Amanda stood up at the window again.

‘I looked down,’ she said, ‘and there were all these little red dots floating around on my chest... it was the laser sights from the police guns. I was really scared and when Dom saw that he really lost his rag. He had a big axe that he’d bought to chop down some trees and he threw it through the window pane. Glass went everywhere.’

Amanda said she could remember the police desperately calling up to her.

‘They wanted me to jump to safety. I said, “That’s two floors down, you must be joking!”’

Then she had an idea. ‘I phoned 999 on my mobile to explain to police that I wasn’t being taken hostage, I was just locked in. But before I could say I wasn’t in any danger my battery ran out.’

Things reached crisis point just before midnight when a smoke canister came flying in through the window.

‘Dom pulled me by the arm into another room but then the door was kicked in and about 10 officers in riot gear with shields came storming in,’ said Amanda. ‘They pushed me into one room and Dom into the bedroom. I heard a bang and then a lot of screaming. Dom had been shot in the groin by a rubber bullet the size of a baked bean tin.’

Peck got two years in prison and lost his council flat and one testicle.

But on the upside, what a story to tell his grandchildren (if he ever has any).

Note: For some reason, this story is even funnier if you put on a very strong Welsh accent when reading Amanda Lacey’s quotes.

Missing people

Lots of people go missing and, where children are concerned, it must be a terrible ordeal. For most parents, anyway.

It was with the dreadful case of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in mind that I responded to a call today. 'A 12-year-old girl has been missing for a few days,' said my radio. 'Please attend the address and see what you can find out.'

When I arrived, the television was on. It remained on throughout the duration of my visit, because it was being watched by mum and mum's partner. I tried to get the details of the missing girl: description, last seen by, wearing what etc etc. This was a bit difficult over the noise of the television, but I persevered. (Author's note to probationers: Televisions are always on in the slums; I used to try to talk over the blare, but now I usually insist that it's turned off. On this occasion I didn't – sorry.)

I asked what enquiries had been made prior to my arrival.

The answer was, beyond a couple of phone calls to random friends, none.

I wasn't getting anywhere so, pushing thoughts of Holly and Jessica to the back of my mind, I set off. My first call was to the girl's school... and there she was!

I had a brief talk with her, asked her where she had been, pointed out the dangers of not telling her guardians where she was and sent her back to class.

I radioed control. 'Panic over,' I said. 'I've found her.'

Then I returned to the house – some 800m from the school – to speak to mum.

'It's OK, she's at school, she's fine,' I said.

The woman stood in the doorway, one eye on the TV. 'That's no good,' she said. 'I want her back here.'

I took a deep breath. 'Well, she's at school. If you're still concerned, how about nipping up there to see her yourself?'

'I haven't got a car.'

'Well, the school is only up the road. You could walk.'

'I'm registered disabled.'

'It's not far,' I said, breathing deeply again.

She turned her baleful gaze on me. 'Look,' she said, as though speaking to an idiot. 'She could be out there being abused right now. I want her back here. It's your responsibility if she gets abused.'

She then shut the door in my face and returned to the television, which I could still hear through the open window.

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I stood there, looking at the peeling green paint of the door, and the rotting wood of the frame, and sighed. Then I checked with control, collected the girl and brought her home.

I spoke again to mother. 'Could you please ensure she doesn't run off in the future?'

'No,' she said. 'I can't do nothing about it.'

'Well, can't you lock her in her room or something?'

'No,' she replied. 'There isn't a lock, and I'm not stopping in all night.'

'But you're registered disabled,' I said. 'Where are you going?'

'Out.'

'So if she goes again will you call the police?'

'Yes, it's your responsibility to find her if she goes missing.'

Next time you get burgled or robbed, you know where to find me: I'll be out looking for children whose parents can't be bothered to look for them themselves.

Neighbours

To a neighbours dispute today, one which involved criminal damage, assault and harassment. How does that distinguish itself from all the other neighbour disputes? Answer: it doesn't. They all involve a combination of the above, plus a belief that the police will sort it all out.

We won't, because we can't.

When I got there, they had all finished swearing at each other but each wanted to make complaints about the other party's foul language.

The male of one of the houses was leaning over his gate as I pulled up. He was out of there and over to the car so quick his nylon tracksuit almost caught fire with the friction. He talked at me as I got out of the vehicle, and continued to do so as I made my way to his garden (I use the word 'garden' in the loosest sense; it was a patch of weed-covered earth with half a car resting in it).

I gathered that the alleged offender was the male of the next door house, whose ratty features I could make out behind the nets in his front window.

‘Yeah, like,’ gabbled Male One. ‘He *really* sworn at me, like, effing and blinding, and I’m really f*cked off with it, and I want him done for it now.’

I groaned, maybe inwardly, maybe outwardly, I can’t remember. ‘I’m sorry sir, but we can’t arrest for swearing in these circumstances.’

He blinked at me, disbelieving. ‘That’s not what I’ve been told.’

‘Well sir, I’m sorry but...’

‘I don’t f*cking believe this,’ he said.

‘Sir...’

‘You’re f*cking sh*t, you. You don’t know f*ck all. I want that bastard arrested.’

I couldn’t help grinning, a tight little grin. ‘Look, sir, as I’ve already explained, I can’t arrest him in these circumstances. However, it is an offence to swear at a police officer if you have been warned about your language. I am, as per Section 5 of the Public Order Act, warning you about your language. Swear again and I’ll lock you up.’

He calmed down.

I spoke to both sides and took statements about swearing and other general nastiness. Three hours later, with all the paperwork completed and the incident logged, both parties (independently) said goodbye and both added, ‘I know it’s a waste of your time.’

‘No problem,’ I replied, without a trace of irony. ‘That’s what we’re here for.’

Then I drove back to the police station, feeling like the only adult in a town full of toddlers.

I hate ‘Hate Crime’

In the absence of organized crime bosses, drug lords and serial killers in the Newtown area this week, I have been left to concentrate on that other menace: hate crime.

Hate crime looms large in the government’s priorities.

I don’t imagine for a moment that being a victim of such a crime can be a pleasant experience, though I deal with mostly fairly petty

Wasting Police Time

examples (if that's not an oxymoron): name-calling, school bullying, offensive text messages, that sort of thing.

I'm not sure, though, that even serious hate crime is any more serious than comparable non-hate crime.

Recently, two men were convicted of the murder of a gay barman, Jody Dobrowski, on Clapham Common in London. They attacked and killed him because he was gay, and they hated gays. They received life sentences, with recommendations that they each serve a minimum of 28 years. Let me say, I abhor their crime. In any civilised, free society, a man's sexuality can't be an excuse for attacking him. I welcome the 28 year sentence, too; that will give them something to think about, and the time in which to do it. I just wish the courts would dish similar terms out to the killers of dads of two who get kicked to death in drunken brawls, or cabbies murdered for their night's takings, or people stabbed for their mobiles.

My current hate-crime involves the victim chasing the offender (yes, you read that right; bear with me). The offender managed to evade the clutches of the victim and shout, 'You f*cking Paki!' as he ran off.

'Why were you chasing him?' I asked Jamil, the victim.

'Because he was annoying me, man. Looking at me and stuff.'

'Did he say anything to you before you started chasing him?'

'No.'

'And what would you have done if you'd caught him?'

'I'd have given him a good hiding.'

I sat back, and looked at him. 'So, Jamil, let me get this straight,' I said. 'You were chasing this kid with the intention of beating him up, he called you a Paki and now you want him prosecuting?'

'Yeah, that's right officer.'

Now that all powers of discretion have been taken away and given that this pathetic load of nonsense has been classified as 'racial', I will have to investigate the matter, knowing full well that nobody is ever going to get prosecuted for it.

Sighing, I bent my head to the statement paper and began to write.

We are fortunate in having a Hate Crime Unit in my force – a team of officers whose job it is to deal with hate crime. That's the theory, anyway. This unit has its own drawer in the post room, so I know it exists. Moreover, it also sends me emails expressing concern for the

victims in cases with which I am dealing. But the Hate Crime Unit 'deals with' hate crime in the bureaucratic sense only: it sends threatening forms advising me of force policy, I tick some boxes and return them. When it comes to *actually* dealing with hate crime, and catching the offenders, that's *my* job.

The form safely filled in, I received an email thanking me and adding: 'We really need to deal with this as soon as possible.'

This means: '*You* need to deal with this as soon as possible.'

By this method, every front line police officer can keep another person in a job who would be otherwise out of work.

I recall being addressed by the new Hate Crime Unit some years ago.

The team visited the uniformed officers and told us how they were going to be able to support us in the front line. Much of this seemed to revolve around sending comforting letters to the homosexual victims of hate crime, but only if they were out.

I found this mildly confusing.

'How are we supposed to know if they're in or out?' I asked. 'And surely it doesn't matter anyway, if you're just sending a letter? If they're out, they'll soon be back, probably by the time the letter gets there.'

'It does matter,' replied the hate crime lady. 'If you were a gay man and you were not out, would you want a letter sent to your house?'

'It wouldn't bother me in the slightest,' I said, mystified. 'Anyway, if I'm not out, I must be in. You could come round in person rather than sending me a letter.'

'But you might not want a visit either.'

'Why not?'

'Because you won't be out.'

'Exactly!' I said. 'I'll be in, so you can see me yourself.'

There was a pause at this point.

I thought the hate crime lady might be reviewing her options and pondering a change to force policy.

She wasn't.

After the meeting I was brought fully 'up to speed', as they say in the Hate Crime Unit, with a side of life about which I had previously been entirely ignorant.