

The Impacts and Benefits of the Mini-Police: Evidence so far...

Authors

Dr Matthew Callender, Kathryn Cahalin, Daniel Moloney and Dr Iain Britton

Introduction

The mini-police scheme is an innovative police engagement programme for school children aged 8-11 years. It was originally conceived in Durham and has since been launched by several forces in England and Wales. Since its conception, the mini-police has grown considerably over the past few years with there now being 388 mini-police schools across 16 forces.

Although, the schemes vary in their emphasis the broad aims of the scheme to:

- build positive relationships between children and the police;
- strengthen trust with communities;
- promote responsible citizenship; and
- help young people establish an interest and understanding in policing and community safety.

The aims of all mini-police initiatives resonate with government strategy that seeks to work with children and young people to reduce their risk of becoming offenders or victims; build positive relations between the police and young people; and nurture their feelings of social responsibility so that they become active citizens. Research literature, relating to other police-youth initiatives and other uniformed groups, suggests that initiatives like the mini-police have strong potential to meet these aims.

The evidence so for....

Findings of a national evaluation of the mini-police, that has gauged both children and adult perspectives provides some initial optimism that the mini-police is meeting its aims. Key findings in relation to identified aims are presented below.

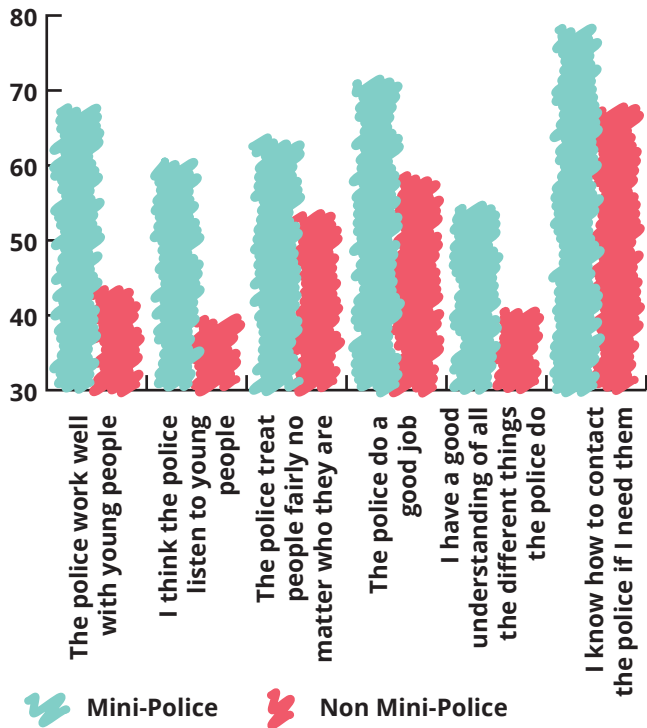
Improving relationships between children and the police and children's understanding of the police

“You get a closer bond with the police and like you get more used to the police... like you don't think they are all bad but they are good”

Workshops conducted with children highlighted that the police officers were perceived by the children as interesting and important, coming from a 'world' that they had limited knowledge of. The children became more aware of what the police aim to do and the improvements to knowledge for some children made them 'less scared' of the police.

The connections that children have made with the officers that deliver the mini-police programmes

in schools were strong and the children spoke fondly of the officers. This connection felt for some children as a form of belonging within the policing family and some children described how they now would feel more comfortable to approach and speak to police officers in public spaces. Critically, the children were more mindful of what the police do and the stresses they face, with the children respecting officers and holding them in esteem.



A survey was also conducted with children and whilst most children (both mini-police and non mini-police) held positive views of the police, participation in the mini-police appears to have an enhancing effect on children’s perspectives with more mini-police children likely to strongly agree with positive statements about the police than non mini-police children. They were also more likely to strongly agree that they have a good understanding of all the different things the police do and how to contact them.

All teachers and parents agreed that the scheme has a positive impact on children’s understanding of what the police do and their confidence and trust in the police. One parent commented:

“He has learned a lot about what the police force does and how they are a big part of our community and he realises the importance of civilian and police unity to combat crime in the area”.

Increasing social responsibility and citizenship amongst young people

“I love the mini-police because we get to help our community and people less fortunate than us”

Children were particularly motivated to improve safety within their local environment, through litter picking, supporting local speed awareness campaigns or online safety. Making an impact on the community enabled children to feel proud of their role in the mini-police and their place within the community. Activities that supported the community were positively reported and children described their hopes to have a greater impact in the future.

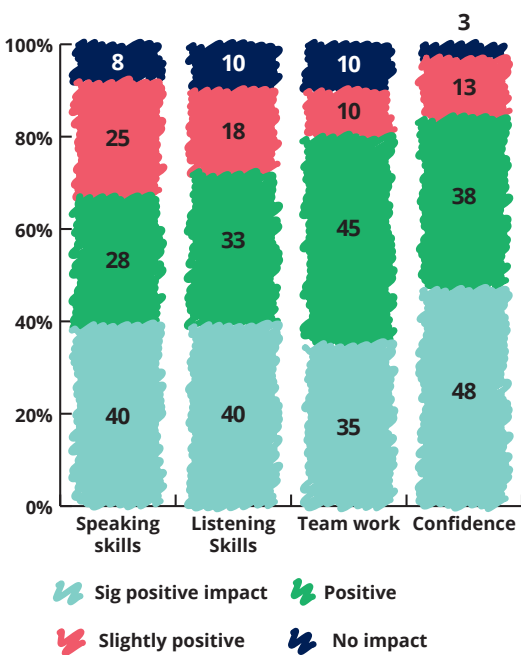
What appeared to be the most valuable outcome were the positive relationships officers had developed with children who previously had, or who live with family members that have, negative views of the police, intervening early to positively change children’s attitudes and values.

Adults also made comments that suggested the scheme is having an impact on children’s sense of community responsibility:

“It helped him become more responsible and involved in preventing and reporting inappropriate actions by observing certain rules.”

Building confidence, esteem and other social skills

“I like being in the mini-police because it helps me be more confident in myself”



The children assumed the identity of being a mini-police officer which led to a range of positive internal emotions. In the workshops, several children described how taking part in the mini-police had impacted their confidence in themselves, enabling new social networks to form within school.

Only 3% of parents surveyed felt the scheme had no impact on their child's confidence, nearly half suggested that participation in the mini-police had a significantly positive impact on the confidence and skills of children. About 9 in 10 indicated that they felt it has had a positive impact on their child's team work skills, listening or speaking skills and about 4 in 10 suggesting that the positive impact was significant.

Teachers were also asked to rate the impact of the scheme on confidence and skills. As with parents, 97% felt being in the mini-police has had a positive impact on the confidence of children.

“Children who are less confident in some situations of responsibility benefited by being part of a team.”

Forging links and relationships between the police and the community

“In terms of community, it's another avenue where we find that we get engaged... They're almost bridging a gap between communities who won't approach the police and the police who can't approach the community...”

Strategic leads discussed how the mini-police receives a positive response from the public when they are out in the community and when they appear on social media. None had experienced any negative coverage. Also, the mini-police were invited to a lot of events, and they were certainly seen by some as a useful and positive way to engage the community.

Evidence from the parent survey suggests that the mini-police has had a positive impact on parent's perceptions of the police and likelihood of engaging with them. Most parents (92%) indicated that their child's participation in the mini-police has positively impacted their view of the extent to which the police do a good job in their area, 75% stated that it had positively impacted their view that police can be trusted in their area and their confidence in reporting a crime or making an enquiry. Parents also talked about having learnt from their child's participation in the mini-police for example, crime prevention information and what to do in certain situations, understanding the varied roles of police officers, work that goes on behind the scenes and their commitment to community engagement activities.



Prevention and disseminating safety messages

■ **“I like road safety – it has taught me to help my brother how to do it safely”**

■ **“Educating young people in relevant subjects that will help them and their families now and in the future. Also understanding signs of criminal activity including county lines.”**

Participants to the surveys and strategic leads were not asked specifically about the extent to which they felt this aim was met. However, in the parent’s survey 15% mentioned safety information as a key thing that their child had got out of it.

■ **“Safety Awareness (Bonfire Night). Community Awareness - what to look out for - dangers Stranger-Danger”**

Continued and future policing interest

■ **“Being in the mini-police helps me as I would like to be a police woman when I’m older”**

The survey indicated that two-thirds (66%) of children in the mini-police were aware of police cadets compared to 45% of children who were not. Mini-police children were much less likely to rule out being a police cadet in the future than their non mini-police counterparts, with 19% indicating that they would not be interested in being a cadet in the future compared to 42% respectively.

Mini-police children were also less likely to rule out being a police officer than their non mini-police counterparts, with 24% indicating that they would not be interested in being a police officer in the future compared to 37% respectively.

Summary

Overall, children were very positive about their experiences and valued their role and sense of belonging in the mini-police. What appeared to be most valuable feature within sites was the positive impact participation in the mini-police had achieved with children who previously held negative views of the police. The unique feature of the mini-police is about forming trusting relationships with the police, reframing the perceptions of who police officers are and what they do. It’s aims are aligned to national strategies, such as the Modern Crime Prevention Strategy and Serious Violence Strategy (Home Office 2016; 2018) to increase children’s positive character traits, resilience and feelings of social responsibility in order that they have positive life outcomes. It also has the potential to make a significant contribution to the national strategy for the Policing of Children and Young People that highlights the importance of positively engaging with children and young people to prevent them from becoming victims or offenders. The mini-police has the potential to provide a consistent engagement model for primary school children, something which does not presently exist.