# Concerns grow over policing and crime response in Scotland amid rising public frustration



In recent weeks, several incidents across Scotland have brought renewed attention to concerns about policing and crime response in the country. Reports highlight a perceived decline in police presence and effectiveness, leading to public unease and frustration.

In Edinburgh, a group of masked quad bikers has repeatedly caused havoc in The Meadows, a popular city park. These riders accelerate across the grass, disrupting families, elderly residents, and dog walkers, before speeding away and leaving the area damaged. Residents have questioned the absence of immediate police intervention in these brazen acts.

Similar frustrations have been voiced elsewhere. In Cambuslang, near Glasgow, an off-licence owner refused to serve a known troublemaker. The individual responded by brazenly seizing a four-pack of beer and drinking at the checkout. The shopkeeper called the police, explaining the situation, but the offender mockingly challenged officers over the phone, and no immediate police response followed.

In Aberdeen, a pensioner faced a home intrusion. The intruder had already taken several bottles of perfume and, after a brief exchange including a query about cannabis sales, fled. Despite several attempts, the victim was unable to get through to Police Scotland’s non-emergency 101 number and eventually abandoned reporting the crime.

Statistics from Police Scotland reveal that since January 2022, more than a million calls to the crime hotline went unanswered, often ending with callers hanging up. These figures have fuelled concerns about the force's capacity and priorities.

Martin Gallagher, a former divisional commander in Paisley who retired in 2022, recounted a personal experience in Linlithgow where he witnessed a street fight involving five men and an audience of around 40, yet no police officers attended the scene. “I didn’t even phone the police because what was the point?” he told the Daily Mail. “If I’m at the stage where I know I’ll never get through – and even if I do the police aren’t going to arrive – and I’m an ex-superintendent, then what is the general attitude from the public who don’t know what I know? No one else phoned the police and they certainly never arrived.”

Mr Gallagher reflected on changes during his 28-year career, describing how the police mission to prevent and detect crime has become “diluted.” Comparing current challenges to policing approaches in the 1990s, he noted that back then, the police would have proactively addressed incidents such as quad bikes damaging public parks with plain clothes officers and innovative tactics. Nowadays, responses are more cautious and restrained. Inspector Scott Casey mentioned that the force is considering the “possible use of drones” to catch offenders, contingent on legal constraints related to residential areas.

The approach of minimising risks and avoiding physical pursuits seemingly prioritises officer and public safety but has raised questions about consequences for victims and the public. Mr Gallagher remarked: “There are risks all over the place and, for the police, it’s in the wrong area. But what about the poor child that gets run over by the quad bike in the meantime?”

Police tactics during recent public disorder further illustrate this trend. Ahead of an Old Firm match in Glasgow on 15 December, dozens of football fans clashed, causing distress to shoppers and workers. Police adopted a containment strategy rather than immediate intervention, later relying on intelligence, CCTV, and social media to identify and arrest a limited number of individuals, though the offenders deliberately obscured their faces. Similarly, during November’s firework-related disturbances in Glasgow and Edinburgh, officers refrained from direct action, following orders from commanding officers.

Martin Gallagher highlighted concerns about such strategies: “How many people were assaulted while the police were standing watching? That’s the question I would ask – and also, how many man hours were spent tracking these people down when, if they had been arrested at the time, those man hours could have been used somewhere far more productively?”

Former Strathclyde Police chief superintendent Tom Buchan, who retired in 2006, related observations about the changing calibre and attitudes of police recruits. He was surprised to learn that mobile phones are now allowed in training classrooms and that some recruits question the necessity of working nights or weekends. Mr Buchan contrasted these modern attitudes with the more rigorous and disciplined training he experienced, describing past standards as “almost military.”

While recognising that modern policing encompasses responsibilities beyond traditional crime fighting—such as social and mental health issues—both former officers noted that these additional duties strain resources. Mr Gallagher pointed out that a significant portion of social work referrals from the police go unaddressed due to capacity issues in social services, leaving the police to provide support roles for which they have limited resources.

He also highlighted operational challenges within custody procedures, noting increased time and scrutiny spent on detainees’ welfare, reduced custodial capacity, and a resulting “revolving door” where suspects are released earlier than before.

Statistics reveal worrying trends: shoplifting in Scotland rose by 18% over the last year, while assaults on retail workers have more than doubled compared to 2022 figures. The issues are compounded by a sizeable number of police officers deemed “non-deployable,” unable to respond to incidents. A freedom of information request indicated that in 2023, 7.5% of the nation’s 16,613 officers were in this category.

The cumulative effect of reduced police visibility and responsiveness has seen some areas described as “policing deserts” by local representatives. Councillor Marie-Clair Munro, representing Morningside in Edinburgh, has voiced community frustration over the diminishing presence of officers, stating: “If there are no police we are stuck between a rock and a hard place – and that’s what people keep saying. ‘Where are the police? Why haven’t we got the numbers? Why don’t we have bobbies on the beat? Why are the police stations being closed down?’” She criticised what she termed “the SNP’s failure to properly support Police Scotland,” describing the situation as “nothing short of shameful.”

In response to these concerns, Police Scotland emphasised ongoing efforts to improve policing services. Deputy Chief Constable Jane Connors told the Daily Mail: “We’ve driven efforts to focus our response on threat, harm and risk and on problem solving and proactivity which can prevent crime and help to reduce demand. We’re taking a proportionate response to crime across Scotland and an appropriate approach to direct measures, including recorded police warnings, so police officers can focus on addressing that threat, harm, risk and vulnerability.”

She added that the force is prioritising frontline services and improving responses to criminal justice and mental health incidents while deploying new tools such as body-worn video cameras in the Tayside area, part of a national rollout to equip over 10,000 officers and staff. Ms Connors also highlighted a healthy recruitment pipeline, with officer numbers currently at 16,535.

Former officers acknowledge that policing today faces a complex and evolving landscape, balancing traditional crime prevention with wider social responsibilities. Mr Buchan reflected on these changes, saying: “We have got to be careful. We are often seen as dinosaurs by those that are in the job.” Yet, he concluded, “Are they providing the service we did? No. Anything like it? No. Nowhere near it.”

As Scotland grapples with these multifaceted challenges, the conversation around law enforcement capabilities, public safety, and community expectations remains a critical issue for policymakers, police forces, and citizens alike.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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