

How not to solve a crime

The police's dilatory response to a minor case exemplifies our national sclerosis.



by Theodore Dalrymple

On 26 October 2022, my friends who are in their early 80s – let's call them Mr and Mrs C – were standing in the narrow drive leading to their house in Devon while talking to a young man. A car started down the drive, and far from slowing as it approached, it accelerated hard towards them, pulling up with a skid about three feet in front of them. Naturally, they were very shaken by this.

They were even more shaken when the driver, a man in his 30s previously unknown to them, replied, when Mr C told him how he had frightened them to death, that that had his intention and

that it had been a joke. "I hope you're sorry," said Mr C. To which he replied that he was not, and he drove away.

Mr C had the presence of mind to take the number of the car, but he and his wife were so shaken by the episode that they did not call the police for two days afterwards. It was only then that their real calvary began.

Mr C called 101, the number for non-urgent calls to the police. After being put through to three robots, he was eventually asked what he wanted by what in Nigerian English would be called a whole human being. Of course, he had come through to the wrong one; but he said that he would put Mr C through to the right one, the so-called contact officer.

The contact officer's number rang for an hour before Mr C gave up. The contact officer was in reality the non-contact officer. The public might be forgiven for thinking that this person's job was to prevent the reporting of crime which so messes up the criminal statistics.

On 30 October, Mr C sent a letter to the local police headquarters outlining what had happened. He thought it was his public duty not to let the matter drop, as no doubt the police would have liked. To this letter, which described the circumstances and gave the police the number of the car, he received no reply. He also wrote to the local Police Commissioner, who did not reply for several weeks. Her third-in-command eventually did, in pure bureaucratese.

On the 16 November, therefore, Mr C wrote to the Chief Constable, telling him that, in addition to the information given in his first letter, there was a witness – actually a co-victim of the crime – who was willing to give a statement, and informing the Chief Constable of how he might be contacted.

On 17th November, mr and mrs c received a visit at home from a police constable, who told them that before he recorded a

crime as having been committed, he would have to speak to the witness referred to and to the driver of the car, but that, even if he came to the conclusion that the crime had been committed, he would do nothing because the Cs had not been injured, were not still threatened by the driver, were not now unsafe, and that the culprit was not still present.

Mr C adroitly changed tack with the police constable and commiserated with him. It must be terrible, he said, for a man who probably went into the force with the idea of protecting the public to have to follow procedures which ensured that the police did nothing.

The police constable suddenly changed tune and said he was going to record the incident as a crime, that the Cs would receive a crime number, and that they would hear further from the police, though not from him. He made it sound as if a crime number were some kind of award, not given to every complainant.

To the letter of 16 November, Mr C received a reply from a person with an indecipherable signature from the Executive Support Team informing him that his letter had been received, that his comments had been "noted", and that:

To address the issues you have raised your correspondence has been forwarded to the most appropriate person/department to deal with your concerns, and a response will be provided to you in due course.

The Cs were not favoured or entrusted with information as to who or what was "the most appropriate person/department", let alone a contact address. Nor had they raised any "issues", as if they were suffering from some kind of psychological disorder: they simply wanted the crime to be recorded and investigated.

On 22 November, a police constable from the *Investigation and Resolution Centre* sent an email to the witness's place of

work:

We have had a report of dangerous driving by a member of the public on which one of your employees may have witnessed the incident.

To this the PC added:

To be fair it did occur about 4 weeks ago on 26th October 2022 11.45hrs.

To be fair? To whom? And who was to blame for the delay? Surely, the intended implication was that, having occurred so long ago, the incident was now best forgotten. The PC asked if a person fitting the name given by Mr C worked for them.

On 24 November, the Cs received a telephone call from a female PC who began by saying that there was nothing more that they, the police, could do – as if they already worked their fingers to the bone. She said that they had tried to contact the witness, but that he had failed to get back in touch with them. This was unlikely to be true, since the employer's email confirming that the man did indeed work for them was not sent until 25 November. Moreover, it implies that the onus was on the witness to go to the police rather than that of the police to go to the witness.

The PC added that, even if the police were able to follow through, nothing would come of it. It would never reach court, and the culprit would receive only an informal warning. (She let drop, as perhaps she should not have done, that the car was not the man's, information that leads to many surmises as to his antecedents. She also said that she had only three years to go before retirement, with the faint implication that the Cs' insistence on their complaint might be endangering it.)

Mr C asked her whether, were he able to obtain a statement himself from the witness, it might pave the way for the police

to act further, to which he received the enigmatic answer, "Possibly." She gave no contact details and could not be contacted again.

Mr C then complained to the Police Commissioner, and on 6 December, received the following reply from a named officer of the Professional Standards Department:

I am very sorry to hear of the difficulties you experienced in reporting your crime to the Devon and Cornwall Police. I am afraid, that at present, demand to our 101 service is outweighing our capacity. Devon and Cornwall Police are taking steps to recruit new contact officers to help resolve the issue of delays to the public. I have noted that your letter to police has resulted in a crime being recorded and enquiries made and that you have been contacted by a officer with the result of those enquiries ... For more information about complaints, please see the Independent Office for Police Conduct website ...

This insulting letter implies that the Cs have not told the whole truth, and that they should in any case have been satisfied that procedure had been followed. What reasonable person could want more than that the procedure should be followed?

The witness told Mr C that, as of 23 December, he had heard nothing from the police, and Mr C obtained a statement from him confirming his story.

On 29 December, Mr C wrote again to the Chief Constable, saying, *inter alia*:

Given the contradictions between what the police have told me and the actual events, you will understand why it seems to me that the police are deliberately choosing to do nothing ... This is not a minor matter. It was a violent assault and we came close to being seriously injured, if not killed.

To this letter, the Cs received a reply on 6 January 2023 with another indecipherable signature, from something called the Administration Team of the North and West Devon LPA, as follows:

In order to address the issues you have raised, your correspondence has been forwarded to Inspector C. A response will be provided in due course. Thank you for bringing this matter to our attention.

As of 17 April 2023, the Cs have heard nothing more.

This is a single episode, small on the national scale no doubt, but far from unique. Indeed, it is what we have come to expect from our police and our other public agencies. It would have taken an afternoon to investigate the crime, solvable even by Inspector Lestrade; instead, it has taken more than three months of complex, organised, determined and labyrinthine inactivity, *not* to investigate it.

We see in it the simultaneous manufacture and avoidance of work, the belief that procedure trumps result, and the development of organisations composed of an apparatchik and a nomenklatura class, in an updated version of the Circumlocution Office whose mission statement was *How not to do it*.

This sclerosis is affecting the whole country, in which the simulacrum of work replaces the real thing.

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