

David Green<sup>id</sup>, Douglas Brown, Harry Smith<sup>id</sup>,  
Joe Chick<sup>id</sup>, and Natasha Preger

---

## Managing the Police Workforce: Sickness and Pensions in the Metropolitan Police in Late Nineteenth-Century London

The provision of pensions for Civil Servants and other employees in public office, such as the police, as well as in large private businesses, became more widespread in the second half of the nineteenth century. Such pensions, and other non-pay benefits, including sick pay, not only helped with recruitment but also provided a means of managing the retirement of workers who were deemed to be incapable of performing their roles. The rules governing eligibility to receive a pension in the Metropolitan Police in London were closely linked to the certification of poor health. Police doctors restricted the certification of sickness as a reason for retirement because it impacted the size of the force, resulted in the loss of more experienced men, and added to the cost of the pension fund. This strategy generated conflict with the workforce, resulting in industrial unrest. Piecemeal reforms failed to address workers' concerns until 1890, when the rights to receive a pension were improved. These reforms, rather than stricter vigilance by police doctors, were an effective way of retaining experienced officers in the police force.

**Keywords:** superannuation, sickness, retirement, police, occupational health

For business historians, Alfred Chandler's concept of "managerial capitalism," outlined initially in his book *The Visible Hand*, provides a broad framework with which to interpret the development

We are grateful to the three anonymous referees for their perceptive comments on an earlier draft of this article. The research was made possible by a grant from the Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy at King's College London.

*Business History Review* 98 (Summer 2024): 417–446. doi:[10.1017/S0007680524000278](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007680524000278)  
© 2024 The President and Fellows of Harvard College. ISSN 0007-6805; 2044-768X (Web). This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

of large industrial corporations in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> For Max Weber, writing in the early part of the twentieth century, at a time of significant expansion of the state's activities, the concept of bureaucracy provides a similarly broad framework with which to interpret the growth of large, hierarchical organizations, such as the Civil Service.<sup>2</sup> Although motivated by different interests, both Chandler and Weber were seeking to understand similar types of phenomena: large and complex organizations, operating across long distances, with clear division between different functional units that were coordinated by hierarchies of management and control. In this respect, the modern business enterprise, with its permanent managerial hierarchy staffed by full-time salaried officers with responsibility for coordination, monitoring, planning, and allocation of capital and labor, shared much in common with the modern state and its hierarchy of permanent civil servants operating according to impersonal relationships and formal rules aimed at ensuring efficiency in the delivery of the state's requirements. Although state bureaucracies did not necessarily need to take account of the invisible hand of the market, nevertheless as the scope and scale of their operations expanded, and as governments became more accountable to an expanding electorate, state departments too had to consider carefully the requirements of economy and efficiency.

Two key challenges faced by any large organization, be it the modern business enterprise described by Chandler or Weber's more abstract concept of bureaucracies, were the ability to attract and retain experienced workers. Together with pay, the provision of non-wage benefits such as sick leave and pensions are among the most important of the various organizational responses to these challenges. Although such benefits are relatively commonplace in many private and public organizations today, they were comparatively rare in the past, confined in Britain mainly to the military; large businesses, such as the railways and the Bank of England; and to departments of state, including the Post Office and other branches of the Civil Service; and, in the case study discussed here, the Metropolitan Police.<sup>3</sup> Beyond these kinds of

<sup>1</sup> Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA, 1977). See also Alfred Chandler with the assistance of Takashi Hikino, *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, "Bureaucracy," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (Oxford, 1958). See also Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 2, The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760-1914*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2012), esp. chapter 13.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of British occupational pensions, see Leslie Hannah, *Inventing Retirement: The Development of Occupational Pensions in Britain* (Cambridge, UK, 1986); Kathleen McIlvenna, *From the Civil List to Deferred Pay: The British Government, Superannuation and Pensions 1810-1909* (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2019).

employments, workers were expected to make their own provision to insure against temporary sickness or the inability to work arising from chronic ill health and old age.<sup>4</sup> In this context, membership in sick clubs and friendly societies, and the growth of life insurance companies, were of immense importance to workers and middle-class families in nineteenth-century Britain.<sup>5</sup> Given that alternative forms of support existed, therefore, the question arises as to the reasons for the provision of workplace benefits, such as sick pay and pensions, and the effectiveness of such policies in relation to recruitment and retention of staff.

Historians have noted the importance of non-wage benefits in private firms as a way of managing productivity and labor relations.<sup>6</sup> Leslie Hannah has argued, for example, that pensions were seen as a way of managing human capital in organizations in which long-term labor market stability was a desired goal.<sup>7</sup> Other historians have noted the moral concerns about workers' welfare, notably by businesses associated with strong ethical and religious beliefs, such as the Quaker firms of Cadbury and Rowntree.<sup>8</sup> For the state, as Kathleen McIlvenna has recently argued, while similar goals and concerns underlay reform of superannuation schemes, other considerations also came into play, notably a desire to mark a break with "Old Corruption" by emphasizing the role of character and morality in the performance of public duties as a condition of receiving a pension. To have served the state for a

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Hannah, "Why Employer-Based Pension Plans? The Case of Britain," *Journal of Economic History* 45 (1985): 348.

<sup>5</sup> For friendly society membership, see P. H. Gosden, *The Friendly Societies in England 1815-75* (Manchester, 1961); James Riley, *Sick, Not Dead: the Health of British Workingmen during the Mortality Decline* (Baltimore, 1997). See also Bernard Harris, "Social Policy by Other Means? Mutual Aid and the Origins of the Modern Welfare State in Britain During the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Policy History* 30 (2018): 202-235. For life insurance, see Timothy Alborn, *Regulated Lives: Life Insurance and British Society 1800-1914* (Toronto, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Much has been written on this topic for private sector firms but less so for public sector organizations. Examples of social programs include, for example, Eugene McCreary, "Social Welfare and Business: The Krupp Welfare Program 1860-1914," *Business History Review*, 42, no. 1 (Spring 1968): 24-49; Joseph Melling, "Industrial Strife and Business Welfare Philosophy: The Case of the South Metropolitan Gas Company from the 1880s to the War," *Business History* 21, no. 2 (1979): 163-179; Helen Jones, "Employers' Welfare Schemes and Industrial Relations in Inter-War Britain," *Business History* 25, no. 1 (1983): 61-75; Robert Fitzgerald, "Employers' Labour Strategies, Industrial Welfare, and the Response to New Unionism at Bryant and May, 1888-1930," *Business History* 31, no. 2 (1989): 48-65; Joseph Melling, "Welfare Capitalism and the Origins of Welfare States: British Industry, Workplace Welfare and Social Reform, c. 1870-1914," *Social History* 17, no. 3 (1992): 453-478; Jakub Kastl and Lyndon Moore, "Wily Welfare Capitalist: Werner von Siemens and the Pension Plan," *Cliometrica* 4 (2010): 321-348.

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of German occupational pensions, see McCreary, "Social Welfare and Business," 33-34, 42-46; Kastl and Moore, "Wily Welfare Capitalist."

<sup>8</sup> See Robert Fitzgerald, "Employment Relations and Industrial Welfare in Britain: Business Ethics Versus Labor Markets," *Business and Economic History* 28 (1999): 169-170.

sufficient length of time with “diligence and fidelity” became a prerequisite for civil servants, and indeed the police, to be granted a pension.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to these considerations and the need for labor force stability, maintaining public trust in services such as the police was essential for them to operate effectively and, in this context, sick pay and pensions were important management strategies. For the Post Office, for example, removing the temptation to steal from the mail during times of financial hardship was an important consideration in the decision to provide relatively generous amounts of sick pay to postal workers. Similarly, granting the right to receive a pension to permanent or “established” postal workers was also an important strategy in the retention of experienced staff.<sup>10</sup> These considerations applied equally to the police force. Retaining public confidence in the integrity of serving officers was absolutely essential, and this entailed reducing the temptation to take bribes as a way of insuring against decreases in income, including those that might have arisen as an outcome of sickness absence. Similarly, because policemen were expected to have a deep personal knowledge of their beats, experience was valued and the promise of a pension helped to retain long-serving officers who, alongside recruits, often worked under difficult circumstances.<sup>11</sup> The provision of sick pay and pensions, therefore, were important management strategies in maintaining staff efficiency and public trust, both of which were essential in the success of policing and other forms of public service.

With the exception of Haia Shpayer-Makov’s work, relatively few historians have turned their attention to the day-to-day working conditions and management of the police workforce, and even fewer have addressed the issues associated with the provision of sick pay and pensions as management strategies.<sup>12</sup> Instead, historians have focused

<sup>9</sup>Kathleen McIlvenna, *From the Civil List to Deferred Pay: The British Government, Superannuation and Pensions 1810–1909* (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2019), 12, 15, 17–22.

<sup>10</sup>See McIlvenna, *From the Civil List to Deferred Pay*, 94–126.

<sup>11</sup>Popular resistance to the introduction of police forces in provincial English cities is discussed in David Churchill, “‘I Am Just the Man for Upsetting You Bloody Bobbies’: Popular Animosity towards the Police in Late Nineteenth-Century Leeds,” *Social History* 39 (2014), 248–266. For London, see S. Inwood, “Policing London’s Morals: The Metropolitan Police and Popular Culture, 1829–50,” *London Journal* 15 (1990): 130–140. For reference to early recruitment and retention problems, see also Haia Shpayer-Makov, *The Making of a Policeman: A Social History of a Labour Force in Metropolitan London, 1829–1914* (Aldershot, 2002), 133–146.

<sup>12</sup>See, in particular, Shpayer-Makov, *The Making of a Policeman*; Haia Shpayer-Makov, *The Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford, 2011). These issues have been explored to a greater extent beyond the capital. See, for example, Carolyn Steedman, *Policing the Victorian Community: The Formation of English Provincial Police Forces, 1856–80* (London, 1983), part 2.

mainly on the reforms that led to the formation of professional police forces, the responses to their actions, and the subsequent role they played in maintaining order and combating crime.<sup>13</sup> In a similar fashion, with a few notable exceptions identified above, business historians interested in the ways in which British firms and organizations used sick pay and pensions to achieve labor market stability have rarely considered the day-to-day decisions that influenced the use of such strategies.<sup>14</sup> In this article, using the Metropolitan Police as a case study, we argue that the monitoring of sickness and the provision of pensions were important strategies for managing human capital.<sup>15</sup> We examine these strategies in relation to the Metropolitan Police in the later decades of the nineteenth century, a period of considerable unrest in the force that focused on the right to receive a pension. On two occasions, in 1872 and again in 1890, labor unrest contributed to significant amendments to pension arrangements. This article argues that in large and bureaucratic organizations, such as the police, monitoring and managing sickness absences, along with the rules relating to pension arrangements, were critical strategies in the management of labor.

We explore the incidence and management of sickness at two distinct levels. We use the annual reports of the chief surgeon to the Metropolitan Police to identify the extent of ill health in the workforce as a whole and assess the problems this caused for policing the city. In addition, for selected years, we use evidence from individual pension records, census records, and death certificates to explore the financial problems posed by premature retirement and pensioners' longevity. Together, this body of evidence allows us to gauge the extent of sickness at both an organizational level and an individual level, and to understand better the problems faced by the police authorities and the effectiveness of their responses. This approach takes the view that appreciating the significance of sickness in relation to retirement and

<sup>13</sup> David Churchill, *Crime Control and Everyday Life in the Victorian City: The Police and the Public* (Oxford, 2017); David Jones, *Crime, Protest, Community, and Police in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1982); Phillip Thurmond Smith, *Policing Victorian London: Political Policing, Public Order, and the London Metropolitan Police* (London, 1985); Robert D. Storch, "The Plague of the Blue Locusts: Police Reform and Popular Resistance in Northern England, 1840–57," *International Review of Social History* 20 (1975): 61–90; Robert D. Storch, "The Policeman as Domestic Missionary: Urban Discipline and Popular Culture in Northern England, 1850–1880," *Journal of Social History* 9 (1976): 481–509. For a review of the historiography, see Simon Devereux, "New Histories of British Policing," *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 1 (2001): 146–151.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview, see Fitzgerald, "Employment Relations and Industrial Welfare in Britain," 167–179.

<sup>15</sup> The Metropolitan Police organization was founded in 1829 and was responsible for policing London, with the exception of the City of London itself, which had its own police force from 1839.

subsequent longevity is an essential element in understanding strategies to manage the workforce. We argue that strategies to monitor and manage the bodily health of policemen had clear implications for the financial health of the police pension scheme, which was seen by the authorities as a critically important aspect of labor management.

### Recording Ill Health

The problems of sickness and staff retention were recognized by the police authorities from an early stage. The responsibility of monitoring policemen's health fell to the chief surgeon of the Metropolitan Police and to the divisional doctors assigned to each police district in the capital. The appointment of the first chief surgeon, Dr. Timothy Holmes, in 1866, was an indication of the growing realization of the need to monitor health, and from then on careful note was made of sickness and injury of policemen in an attempt to lower absence and reduce premature retirement. The prominence of the chief surgeon's reports in the annual reports of the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police confirms the significance attached by the authorities to addressing the various challenges posed by high levels of sickness in the force. From 1869, the commissioner's annual reports included a separate report by the chief surgeon, which occupied a prominent position amidst the numerous tables of crimes, indictments, and other aspects of work undertaken by the police. Each of the chief surgeon's reports began with a commentary reflecting on the overall pattern of sickness, followed by several tables with figures on the nature of ill health, injuries, hospitalizations, and deaths. The annual reports also included a breakdown of causes for retirement, including detailed information on the different medical conditions that forced officers to leave their posts. The names of those who died while employed and the causes of deaths were noted separately.

While the chief surgeon's reports provide an exceptionally rich body of evidence with which to gauge the overall significance of sickness, they do not record any personal information about retirees, which is important for the light that it can shed on the nature and provision of pensions. For this, we need to turn to the pension records themselves, which are available throughout the period of this study.<sup>16</sup> The forms include details that allow us to study health outcomes alongside a variety of personal attributes. As well as the cause and date of retirement, the forms record a policeman's rank, date, place of birth, length of service,

<sup>16</sup>Metropolitan Police Pension Registers, MEPO 21, The National Archives (TNA), accessed 18 June 2024, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61310>.

police division, career injuries, marital status, height, and even hair and eye colors. Using the pension records from a sample of years (1861, 1871, 1878, 1881, 1891, and 1901) that covered 1,356 individual police pensioners, we can link these individuals to their registration of death, and therefore assess their longevity in retirement—an important consideration for the financial health of the police pension scheme.<sup>17</sup> Tracing a sub-sample of individuals through the census after they retired allows us to consider the adequacy of the pension and its impact on the post-retirement participation in the workforce. Together with the information contained in the annual reports, these data provide us with an exceptionally rich body of evidence with which to gauge health at the workplace and the post-retirement work trajectories of police retirees. They also allow us to explore the effectiveness of sickness monitoring and pensions as management strategies to manage the police labor force.

### Strong and Sturdy Men

The establishment of the Metropolitan Police in 1829 as the first professional police force in the UK was a milestone in the history of policing in Britain. For the first time, the responsibility for policing came under the authority of the Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel, with day-to-day operations overseen by specially appointed commissioners.<sup>18</sup> The jurisdiction of the new force extended across the metropolitan area, covering a radius of seven miles, from Charing Cross to the surrounding countryside and suburbs, but excluding the City of London itself.<sup>19</sup> Policing became a full-time, paid occupation with uniformed officers patrolling the streets unarmed. From a force that numbered just over 1,000 men at its founding, the Metropolitan Police workforce grew rapidly: in 1870 the number had risen to 9,160, and by the end of the century, it had grown to 15,847.<sup>20</sup> Such growth, of course, reflected—and

<sup>17</sup>The final year for which a detailed cause of retirement was provided is 1878. From December 1878, a small number used a new version of the form without a cause of retirement, but this information is recorded for the majority of 1878 retirees. Matching by name and location allowed us to link over 90 percent of pensioners to a date of death. We are extremely grateful to Rosemary Finan, Peter Gibson, Richard Horn, Roz Jones, Heather Latus, Jane Masters, Tim Masters, Janice Robinson, Nuala Starkey, and Cameron Waite, who assisted in this record linkage.

<sup>18</sup>Police constables were often nicknamed “Bobbies” or “Peelers” after the founder of the force, Sir Robert Peel.

<sup>19</sup>The City of London police force was created in 1839, along with other provincial police forces.

<sup>20</sup>*Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1871, 3, British Parliamentary Papers; *Report of the Commission of the Metropolis*, 1902, 5, British Parliamentary Papers. The annual reports are reprinted in the House of Commons, Parliamentary Papers, accessed 18 June 2024, <https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers>.



barely kept pace with—London's expansion: between 1870 and 1900, over 1,355 miles of new streets were added to the city's urban fabric, much of which were in suburban districts.<sup>21</sup>

Metropolitan Police constables were expected to be strong and sturdy men who were sufficiently robust and imposing to perform the arduous duties associated with enforcing law and order on London's streets. Recruits were required to have been vaccinated against smallpox and to be of a minimum height, although the official limits sometimes had to be ignored if insufficient numbers of recruits were available.<sup>22</sup> The annual commissioner's report for 1871, for example, complained of the difficulties in recruiting suitable officers, and it appears that the height requirement of 5 foot 7 inches sometimes had to be ignored, given the presence of policemen shorter than this in the pension application forms.<sup>23</sup> These problems were exacerbated by relatively high rates of labor turnover: in the 1870s, over half the recruits left within four years of joining the police; and this rate, coupled with retirements, meant that over 10 percent of the workforce left each year.<sup>24</sup> Over time, as recruitment improved, the physical requirements became more stringent and more consistently enforced. Dr. Alexander McKellar, appointed to replace Dr. Timothy Holmes as chief surgeon to the police in 1885, claimed that half the town recruits had to be rejected because of their poor physical condition.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, as retention rates improved, it became possible to raise the standards required for entry to the police. In 1887, the authorities felt they could raise the height requirement to 5 foot 9 inches to enforce a tougher medical examination for new applicants, and to introduce a maximum entry age of 27 years old.<sup>26</sup> In his evidence to the Departmental Committee on Superannuation in 1889, Dr. McKellar claimed that the physical examination of new recruits, which included full-body examinations and checks for varicose veins, bunions, weak feet, or poor muscular development, was the most rigorous currently in place in any British organization.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Police*, 1902, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Arlidge, *The Hygiene, Diseases and Mortality of Occupations* (London, 1892), 99.

<sup>23</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1871, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Shpayer-Makov, *Making of a Policeman*, 80.

<sup>25</sup> Departmental committee of 1889 upon Metropolitan Police superannuation, q. 1305–1307, 1890 LIX [Cmd 6075] Police superannuation, British Parliamentary Papers.

<sup>26</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1887, 4, British Parliamentary Papers.

<sup>27</sup> Departmental Committee of 1889 upon Metropolitan Police Superannuation, q. 1311–1312.



### Monitoring Sickness

Although height and a sound constitution were not necessarily a guarantee of continued good health, they were nevertheless indications of the physical prowess of policemen and therefore the high levels of sickness that the chief surgeon reported each year were noteworthy. From 1871, the annual reports include the number of days of sickness across the entire Metropolitan Police force.<sup>28</sup> There was particular concern that year because of a very severe and protracted outbreak of smallpox, but Dr. Holmes was also keen to draw attention to the achievement of the Metropolitan Police in not allowing this to drive sickness rates up, which he attributed to the decision in February 1871 to re-vaccinate the entire force.<sup>29</sup> Instead, as that and subsequent reports noted, it was the diseases associated at the time with exposure—the infectious respiratory diseases of coryza (which is now more commonly called rhinitis), bronchitis, and tonsillitis, together with rheumatism—that were responsible for much of the staff absence.

Despite the optimism shown by the chief surgeons, it was clear that policemen were far from healthy. In 1870, Dr. Holmes reported that 4,642 separate individuals had reported in sick, and in 1900 this figure had risen to 7,771.<sup>30</sup> The amount of sickness, however, was higher than these figures because many men were sick on more than one occasion; as a result, the number of cases was always higher than the number of sick individuals.<sup>31</sup> Although on any given day only around 3–4 percent of the workforce were absent because of sickness, during winter this percentage rose considerably; and this, together with those on annual leave, meant that the effective workforce was always lower than the total number of policemen noted in the annual reports.<sup>32</sup>

In 1890, a writer for the *Daily News* stated in relation to the police that “it is a fact that, in spite of thick boots, warm clothing, and waterproof capes, diseases of the lungs play considerable havoc among the ranks of the force.”<sup>33</sup> That the writer focused attention on poor

<sup>28</sup>These appear in all subsequent reports except for 1881 and 1885.

<sup>29</sup>*Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1871, 6, 31–32. The report from that year states that only 42 policemen were diagnosed with the disease, with a further 91 incapacitated as a result of their vaccination, forming just under 2 percent of all sickness cases in 1871.

<sup>30</sup>*Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1871, 11; *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1902, 18.

<sup>31</sup>In 1870, the number of cases was 6,758; in 1900, the figure was 9,643. See *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1871, 11; *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1902, 17.

<sup>32</sup>The average percentage of the workforce absent between 1870 and 1900 because of sickness was 3.2 percent. Figures taken from the commissioner’s annual reports, 1870–1902.

<sup>33</sup>*Daily News*, 10 July 1890.

health was telling. Apprehending criminals and the threat of violence were constant features of a constable's working life, but what sapped their health and was responsible for most premature retirement was not necessarily the injuries they suffered as they went about their duties but the impact on their bodies of pounding the beat at all hours of the day and night and in all kinds of weather. Stricter entry requirements and more stringent medical examinations could not fully remove the risk of officers taking time off sick, especially given that the nature of the work left individuals particularly at risk of conditions such as rheumatism or coryza. While the collation of statistics of sick leave allowed the management to be aware of the extent of the problem, it did not provide an obvious solution to maintaining the strength of the force other than stricter monitoring of sickness claims. This morbid toll not only disrupted the efficiency of police work but also resulted in a significant financial cost in sick pay, pensions, and—in cases of death because of injury suffered on duty—compensation to bereaved widows. In particular, premature retirement because of poor health threatened the financial viability of the pension fund, which was viewed as an essential management tool for attracting recruits and retaining experienced men.

### Managing the Burden of Sickness

Managing the burden of sickness involved three considerations: ensuring that a sufficient number of constables were available to patrol the London streets; limiting the amount of sick pay; and reducing the impact of premature retirement on the financial viability of the pension fund. All three were, in practice, closely related. The provision of sick pay, and especially the right to a pension, were important incentives in recruitment and retention of experienced men. However, until 1890 it was difficult to be granted a pension other than because of permanent injury sustained on duty or by being certified sick and incapacitated for work by a police doctor. Policemen themselves claimed that because they contributed to the pension through deductions from pay, they should have a right to receive it without the necessity of being certified as incapacitated, and that denial of that right was the main reason why it proved difficult to recruit suitable candidates and retain experienced men.<sup>34</sup> Recruitment, retention, and retirement therefore pivoted around the certification of poor health at work—and for that reason, we need to consider the relationships between sickness and retirement in more detail.

The Metropolitan Police, like the Post Office and other branches of the Civil Service, provided a range of benefits for employees that

<sup>34</sup>*Daily News*, 30 July 1872; *Daily Telegraph*, 17 Oct. 1872; *The Times*, 12 May 1873.

included the possibility of a pension and the provision of sick pay.<sup>35</sup> Except for those injured on duty, a sick policeman's pay was reduced by a shilling a day for the duration of their illness up to 56 days.<sup>36</sup> This formed a significant share of their weekly wage, which for much of the period ranged from 24 to 30 shillings for constables, two shillings of which would already go toward deductions, including the pension fund.<sup>37</sup> Sick leave with pay could extend for up to 28 days, certified regularly by a divisional police surgeon, and this could be extended for another 28 days, although this then had to be approved by the chief surgeon. After a total of 56 days sickness absence, officers were placed on long-term "detached" leave. After 1885, stricter conditions were introduced for those sick officers on detached leave, including the loss of one-fifth of pay and the very real possibility of being dismissed, with or without a pension.<sup>38</sup> Reining in the costs of sick pay and reducing claims for retirement on grounds of ill health by operating more stringent checks were therefore important considerations for police doctors when assessing sickness claims.

Because of the need to limit the costs of sick pay and pensions, close attention was paid to ensuring that requests for sick leave were genuine, by no means an easy task even for experienced doctors employed as divisional surgeons. Doctors, who were required to certify whether a policeman was fit to continue, had to weigh the cost to the pension fund versus whether the individual in question could perform his duties efficiently. In 1872, against a backdrop of considerable industrial unrest in the police force, the chief surgeon noted that the sickness rate in the Metropolitan Police was nearly double that of the City force and queried whether it was the result of lax attention to claims for sick leave. He was adamant: "No man ought to be placed on the sick list, unless there are definite symptoms of illness; and any attempt at imposition in this particular, however slight an extent, should be reported and adequately punished."<sup>39</sup> However, from the workers' perspective, building up a record of sickness, which according to Dr. McKellar was a form of "scheming" adopted by many policemen who wished to get a pension on the grounds of incapacity, was the main way that an individual officer

<sup>35</sup>For the Post Office, see Kathleen McIlvenna, Douglas H. L. Brown, and David R. Green, "'The Natural Foundation of Perfect Efficiency': Medical Services and the Victorian Post Office," *Social History of Medicine* 33 (2020): 539–558.

<sup>36</sup>Shpayer-Makov, *Making of a Policeman*, 163–164.

<sup>37</sup>Shpayer-Makov, *Making of a Policeman*, 181.

<sup>38</sup>Departmental Committee of 1889 upon Metropolitan Police Superannuation, q. 1352, 1367.

<sup>39</sup>*Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1872, 35, British Parliamentary Papers. See also "Sickness and Mortality of the Police Force," *British Medical Journal* (26 April 1890): 932.

could stake a claim for early retirement. The risk for the policeman in question was that a false claim could lead to disciplinary action or even dismissal without a pension, a prospect that was the cause of considerable anxiety for those approaching retirement.<sup>40</sup> Balancing these competing demands was far from easy, as Dr. Holmes noted. It was important not to generate hostility between a worker who had a legitimate reason for taking sick leave and the certifying police doctor, and it was equally important to prevent scheming; Dr. Holmes stated:

It would, no doubt be very undesirable to excite a feeling of hostility between the men and their medical attendants, or to give occasion for any charge of rigour or want of feeling on the part of the divisional surgeons, but it is our duty to take all possible pains to satisfy ourselves that the diseases to which we certify are genuine.<sup>41</sup>

### Sickness Rates

Following the appointment of Dr. Holmes, recording injuries and sickness in a systematic way became standard practice. In 1872, he noted with some pride that sickness rates had been halved since his appointment six years earlier, claiming closer monitoring of ill health as the likely reason as well as the prevention of policemen from joining sick clubs, which he claimed were an inducement to take time off in the knowledge that members would receive benefits along with sick pay. Dr. Holmes noted, "I recognise with much pleasure the effect which the very collection of statistics in any form, and the increased care thus bestowed on the variations of sickness in this force, have obviously had in diminishing the ratio of sickness."<sup>42</sup> Only by systematically reporting the medical outcomes, he argued, could comparisons be made, and he developed strategies to reduce the relatively high levels of sickness that prevailed in the force.<sup>43</sup> A key factor, however, appears to have been the management's stricter attention to long-term sick leave and the earlier removal from the force of any policeman considered to have little chance of recovery from illness.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Departmental Committee of 1889 upon Metropolitan Police Superannuation, q. 1782, 1789. See also John Hunt, *The Policeman's Struggle; addressed to the inhabitants of the Metropolitan Police District* (London, 1863).

<sup>41</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1872, 35.

<sup>42</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1872, 34.

<sup>43</sup> For comparison with the Post Office see Douglas Brown, David R. Green, Kathleen McIlvenna, and Nicola Shelton, "The Beating Heart of the System: The Health of Postal Workers in Victorian London," *Journal of Historical Geography* 68 (2020): 75–85.

<sup>44</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1870, 12, British Parliamentary Papers.

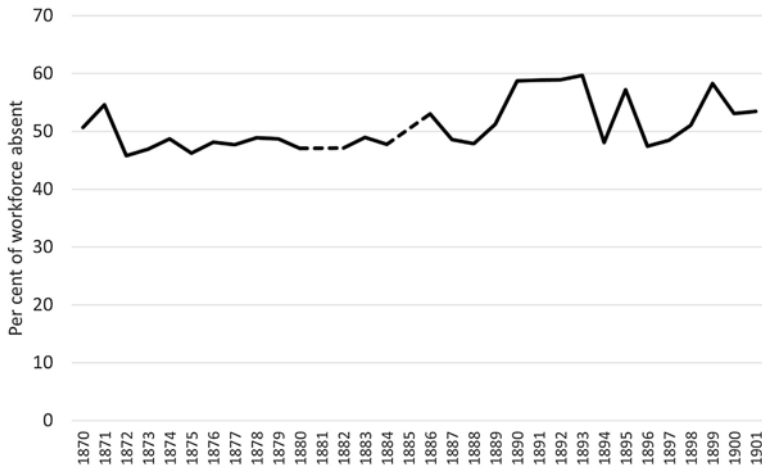


Figure 1. Proportion of police officers taking sick leave during the year. Note: No annual report was published in 1881 and figures were missing for 1885. (Source: Annual Report of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, 1870-1902.)

Despite Dr. Holmes' optimism, the reduction in the sickness rate that took place in the first few years of his tenure does not appear to have been sustained as rates remained relatively stable throughout the 1870s and early 1880s. While the daily rate of sickness was around 3 or 4 percent of the total workforce on duty, Figure 1 shows that for much of the time, the proportion of the workforce reporting sick at any point during the year hovered at just below half.<sup>45</sup> Despite the apparent lack of any further improvement in reducing sickness absence in these decades, the chief surgeon nevertheless claimed a degree of success in his attempts to limit sickness. From the late 1880s, sick leave numbers began to rise, driven initially by the outbreak of the Russian flu in late 1889, which continued into the early 1890s.<sup>46</sup> The rise was heavily concentrated in the winter, with peaks in the first quarter and, to a lesser extent, the fourth quarter of the year. An exception occurred in 1891, when there was a spike in the sickness rate in the spring, owing to the second wave of the Russian flu in April and May in England and later in

<sup>45</sup>The daily rate of sickness is derived from the annual reports of the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. It represents the total number of men on sick leave compared to the total authorized strength of the force.

<sup>46</sup>For an overview of the Russian flu, see Mark Honigsbaum, *A History of the Great Influenza Pandemics, 1830-1920* (London, 2020). For the demographic impact of the flu epidemic in London, see Michael Bresalier, "A Most Protean Disease": Aligning Medical Knowledge of Modern Influenza, 1890-1914," *Medical History* 56 (2012), 481-510; Harald Brüssow, "What We Can Learn from the Dynamics of the 1889 'Russian Flu' Pandemic for the Future Trajectory of COVID-19," *Microbial Biotechnology* 14 (2021): 2244-2253.

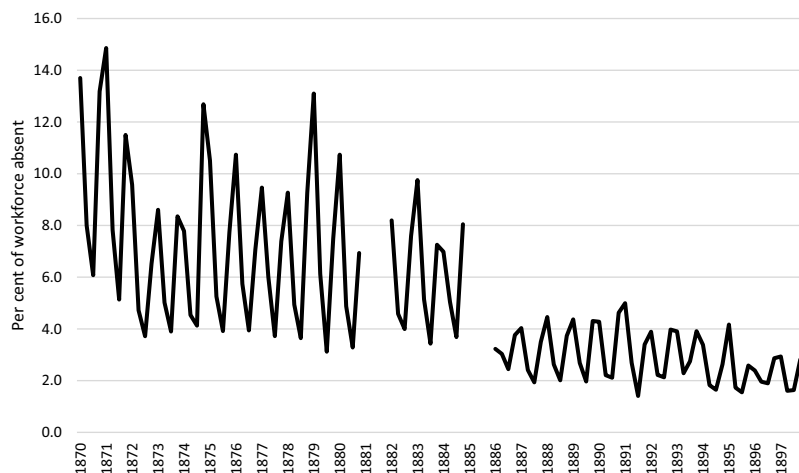


Figure 2. Quarterly sickness rate from coryza, bronchitis, rheumatism, and tonsillitis as a percentage of the total workforce 1870-1897. Note: No figures were included in the 1881 and 1885 reports. (Source: Annual reports of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, 1871-1898.)

Scotland. For the rest of the decade, the sickness rate fluctuated with marked peaks and troughs, corresponding with later waves of the disease, but in general the proportion of policemen who reported sick in any given year remained at around 50 percent.

In terms of the day-to-day arrangements for policing the city, the seasonal burden of sickness was a significant problem, along with the number of injuries sustained by policemen while on duty. Between 1870 and 1882, the annual reports contain sickness cases by month, and from 1883 until 1897 the data are quarterly. Four health conditions that were associated with outdoor work particularly concerned the chief surgeon and were monitored separately every month: coryza, bronchitis, rheumatism, and tonsillitis.<sup>47</sup> Figure 2 shows the quarterly incidence of these four conditions as a percentage of the end-of-year total workforce. Throughout the period of this study, absences peaked during the autumn and winter months (October to March), often reaching over 8 percent of the workforce during the 1870s and early 1880s, when Dr. Holmes was the chief surgeon. The proportion of the workforce on sick leave arising from these four conditions, however, declined sharply when Dr. McKellar took over in 1885. During McKellar's tenure, sickness rates from these common conditions hovered at between 2 and 4 percent of the workforce,

<sup>47</sup>In reports of the commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, coryza is termed as catarrh in 1870 and 1871 and 1898-1901, and tonsillitis is described as sore throat in 1870 and 1871.

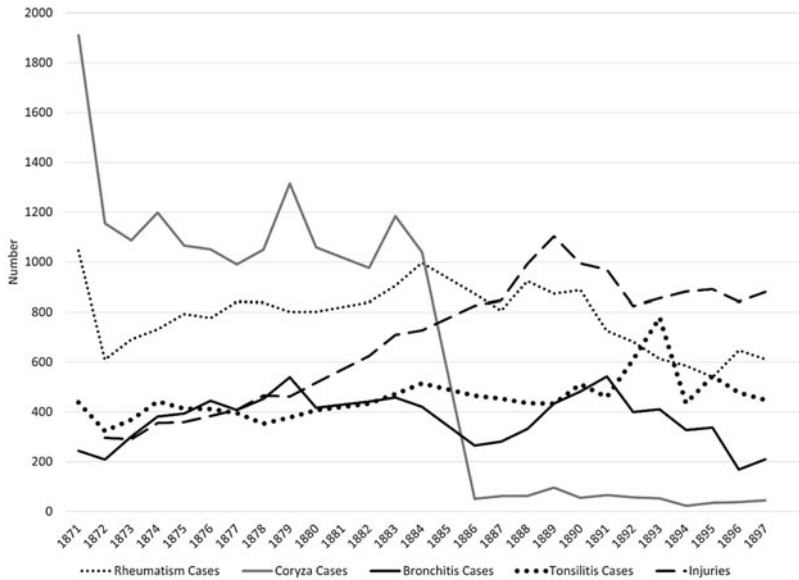


Figure 3. Number of policemen absent from work because of sickness and injury, 1871-1897. Note: figures are missing for 1881 and 1885. (Source: Annual Report of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, 1870-1902.)

a marked change from the rates recorded during Dr. Holmes's period as chief surgeon, with the decline largely accounted for by the almost total disappearance of coryza as a reason for taking sick leave. Dr. McKellar claimed that regular meetings with the divisional surgeons and a more watchful eye over claims for sickness had helped reduce the number of men placed on the sick list.<sup>48</sup> Other factors, however, such as a change in night duties in 1889, which were reduced from two consecutive months to one month at a time, might also have played a part.<sup>49</sup>

The change in policy is evident when comparing the absolute numbers of men who were absent from work as a result of sickness from coryza, bronchitis, rheumatism, tonsillitis, and injury, shown in Figure 3. The absolute decline in coryza, as noted above, is clear, as is to a lesser extent that of rheumatism—a notoriously difficult condition to diagnose.<sup>50</sup> During Dr. McKellar's period, the proportion of the workforce claiming sick leave because of rheumatism fell from

<sup>48</sup>Departmental Committee of 1889 upon Metropolitan Police Superannuation, q. 1508-09.

<sup>49</sup>Departmental Committee of 1889 upon Metropolitan Police Superannuation, q. 1721.

<sup>50</sup>See Peter English, "Emergence of Rheumatic Fever in the Nineteenth Century," *The Milbank Quarterly*, 67, supplement 1 (1989): 33-49.



winter peaks of around 2.5 percent in the 1870s to around 1.5 percent by the 1890s. Dr. McKellar was particularly suspicious of rheumatism, which he thought was frequently used as an excuse to seek early retirement. Appearing before the 1889 Departmental Committee on Superannuation, he stated that “a man may suffer from rheumatism, but it is not satisfactory to the medical man, because we frequently cannot find any evidence, or sufficient evidence to corroborate the man’s statement.”<sup>51</sup> By contrast, the numbers of policemen absent because of injury rose, and together with the relative decline of the more minor conditions and the ongoing importance of more severe illnesses such as tuberculosis, was likely to have led to a longer duration of sick leave. Between 1872 and 1884, the duration of sick leave was recorded in the commissioner’s annual reports, and these figures show that longer periods of sick leave were being taken by policemen. Whereas 41 percent of workers reporting sick took more than seven days of leave in 1872, this proportion had risen steadily to 57 percent by 1884.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, subsequent reports fail to include similar information, and it is therefore impossible to confirm whether this pattern persisted.

### Sickness and Pensions

While sickness absence and potential long-term illness posed a significant challenge to the effective day-to-day-management of police work, it was also deeply problematic for the overstretched and underfunded police pension fund. The Police Superannuation Fund had been set up in 1839 by an act of Parliament with the view of making provision for those policemen injured or worn out in service, as well as providing an incentive to good conduct and an inducement to experienced officers to remain in post.<sup>53</sup> It was for these reasons that only officers who had served for at least 15 years could be considered for a pension. Those with less than five years’ service had no entitlement, while those with five to 14 years retiring for health reasons who were certified by a police surgeon would receive one month’s pay for each year of service, providing also that they had served “with zeal and fidelity.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup>Departmental Committee of 1889 upon Metropolitan Police Superannuation, q. 1477.

<sup>52</sup>These figures are derived from data provided in the annual reports of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. The data ceased to be recorded after 1884.

<sup>53</sup>The Metropolitan Police Act, 2 & 3 Vict. c.47. See also “Police Superannuation Fund,” Report from the Select Committee on Police Superannuation Funds, 1875, XIII [Cmd 352], MEPO/4/291/8-10, q. 4654-4658, British Parliamentary Papers, TNA. For a history of the pension fund, see James Monro, “The Story of Police Pensions,” *The New Review* 3, no. 16 (Sep. 1890): 194-207.

<sup>54</sup>“Police Superannuation Fund,” report from the Select Committee on Police Superannuation Funds, q. 4660-4666.

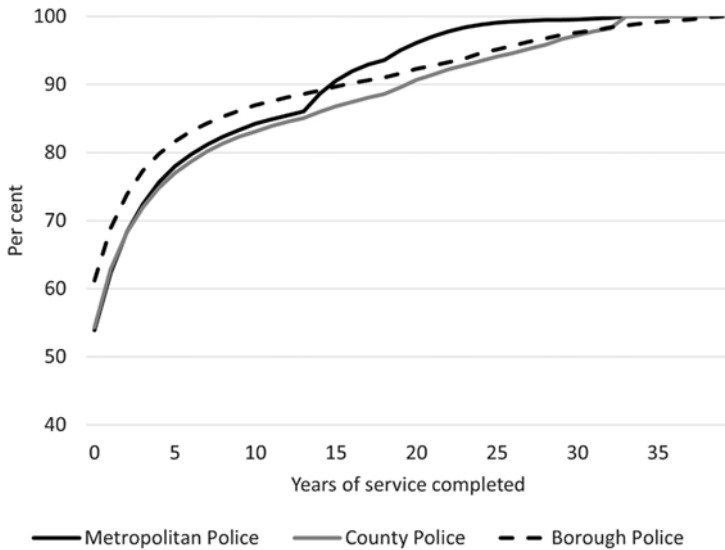


Figure 4. Length of service in three police forces. Note: The data refers to Metropolitan Police 1829–1860; County Police 1840–1874, Borough Police 1837–74. (Source: *Report: Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix, Select Committee on Police Superannuation Funds, Evidence of William Farr, Appendix: Table XLVI comparative table of three police forces, House of Commons, Parliament, London, 1877*).

The police were always more generous with those injured while undertaking their duties, and this formed the only basis on which an officer with less than 15 years' service could be considered for a full or partial pension.<sup>55</sup>

Longer serving officers were entitled to a pension if they reached the age of 60, but given the physical and mental demands of the work, virtually no constable ever reached that age while working as an officer. By the time policemen had served around 15 years, they were generally worn out, a point made by William Farr, superintendent of the Statistical Department of the Register Office, in his evidence to the Select Committee on Police Superannuation in 1877. Farr's evidence pointed out the high rates of attrition in the Metropolitan, County, and Borough police forces and the actuarial problems this posed for their pension funds. Figure 4, based on Farr's figures, show that in all three police forces, less than 16 percent of policemen managed to work for

<sup>55</sup>In 1845, there was an experiment with short-service pensions for cases in which the retiree had a medical certificate and agreed to be reassessed later, but this was discontinued in 1849. See "Police Superannuation Fund," q. 4772–4773.

longer than 15 years. In the Metropolitan Police, the sharp increase in the proportion retiring after 15 years reflected the fact that constables became eligible for a pension at that point, even though they could only retire on grounds of certified ill health. Dr. McKellar, in his evidence to the 1889 Departmental Committee on Police Superannuation, considered that this pattern was the result of a high proportion of “worn out men—they have lost their nerve; they may have some rheumatism, but they are prematurely aged men—men who appear to be many years older than they really are from the premature senile decay that has taken place.”<sup>56</sup>

The problem for the police authorities was that these “worn out men” left early but lived long. Despite instructions by the chief surgeon to police doctors to exert “constant vigilance” to avoid recommending persons for the receipt of a pension who were not permanently unfit, the length of time that retirees survived suggested that, in many cases, they were in relatively sound health.<sup>57</sup> Appearing before the 1875 Parliamentary Select Committee on the Police Superannuation Fund, Superintendent James Mott questioned the medical grounds for retirement. “It is a curious thing,” he noted, “that men before leaving are frequently very ill; you meet them a few months afterwards, and you find them perfectly restored to health.”<sup>58</sup>

Mott had good reason to be suspicious. William Farr had shown in 1866 that less than 10 percent of pensioners died within 15 years of retirement, and other evidence confirms the longevity of retirees.<sup>59</sup> Table 1 shows information drawn from the pension records of 1,356 policemen who retired in selected years between 1861 and 1901. With the exception of 1861, the average age at retirement ranged from 45.7 to 47.7 years old. Record linkage with death registers shows that, on average, police pensioners lived at least another 22 to 23 years after retirement, almost as long, in most cases, as their lengths of service.<sup>60</sup> By comparison, this figure was nearly double that of workers who retired from the Post Office in a similar period, who tended to leave working at a later age.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Departmental Committee of 1889 upon Metropolitan Police Superannuation, q. 1440.

<sup>57</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, 1877, 47, British Parliamentary Papers.

<sup>58</sup> “Police Superannuation Fund,” q. 4745.

<sup>59</sup> Departmental Committee of 1889 upon Metropolitan Police Superannuation, q. 1449.

<sup>60</sup> Age at death was gathered from record linkage with death registers, matching by place and name together with any additional corroborating documents, including census records.

<sup>61</sup> Research currently in progress shows that the average age at retirement in the Post Office starts at 56.5 years in 1860 and then drops fairly consistently from 54.8 years in 1870 to 47.5 in 1890, and to 43.8 in 1900. See “Morbidity, Mortality and Occupational Health in the Victorian and Edwardian Post Office,” *Addressing Health*, accessed 15 Nov. 2023, <https://addressinghealth.org.uk/>.

Table 1  
Police Pensioners 1861-1901

<i>Retirement year (number of pensioners)</i>	<i>Average age at entry (yrs)</i>	<i>Average age at retirement (yrs)</i>	<i>Average age at death (yrs)</i>	<i>Length of service (yrs)</i>	<i>Longevity (yrs)</i>
1861 (105)	25.1	42.3	67.1	17.2	24.7
1871 (156)	24.6	45.8	65.7	21.2	19.9
1878 (175)	24.5	45.7	69.4	21.2	23.7
1881 (168)	23.9	46.3	68.4	22.4	22.1
1891 (399)	22.6	47.7	70.6	25.1	22.9
1901 (353)	23.0	47.1	70.4	24.1	23.3

Source: London, England, *Metropolitan Police Pension Registers, 1852–1932*, accessed 27 May 2024, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61310>. Original data from The National Archives, Series MEPO 21, Metropolitan Police Pension Registers.

### The Struggle over Superannuation

From the management's perspective, the lure of receiving a pension functioned as an effective inducement for policemen to remain in their post for as long as possible or until they truly became incapacitated and unable to work. It was important to retain enough experienced men because policing required not only robust bodies but also detailed local knowledge and the exercise of judgment. Each constable was expected to know their beat intimately, and personal knowledge of their area was crucial to effective policing of the capital's neighborhoods. Neither did the police authorities necessarily want men over the age of 50 who were past their prime patrolling the streets.<sup>62</sup> However, as the high attrition rate highlighted by William Farr shows, retaining experienced policemen was deeply problematic. Providing lodgings for new recruits in section houses, better boots and uniforms, improving conditions at work—all part of what Haia Shpayer-Makov has called paternalistic bureaucracy—were important in helping to recruit and retain staff, but the lure of a pension was the linchpin of the strategy to keep experienced men in their posts.

The desire to retain experienced men provided the workforce with greater power to negotiate their pay and conditions. Sergeants and constables exercised that power on two occasions: in 1872 and 1890, when long-seated grievances around pay, conditions, and pensions resulted in strikes and ultimately led to reform of the pension

<sup>62</sup> "Police Superannuation Fund," q. 3685.

arrangements.<sup>63</sup> The unrest that took place focused largely on the question of superannuation, and this, in turn, revolved around the way that the police authorities managed sickness in the force. In 1872, Roger Ekyn, member of Parliament, who had taken up the policemen's cause in Parliament, argued:

The substantial cause of the present unsettled state of the police is the absence of a proper system of police superannuation. Till that is placed on a proper basis, little inducement is offered for the experienced men to remain, or good men to enter the force.<sup>64</sup>

For the men, widespread dissatisfaction existed over a range of issues, including pay, drilling, and lodging regulations, but most of all over the conditions relating to the pension. Because the pension was contributory, it was viewed by the men as deferred pay, and therefore they claimed it should not be discretionary, as was the case, but should rightfully be paid out when a policeman retired.<sup>65</sup> However, what ultimately proved to be the catalyst for the unrest was the more limited pension arrangements that had been introduced during a period of financial stringency in 1862, which involved a reduction in the amount that pensioners could receive and a lengthening of the maximum period of service.<sup>66</sup>

The growing sense of injustice fueled what was described in the press as a mutiny in November 1872, when around 180 constables from several police divisions refused to go out on night duty. Commissioner Henderson, who had been appointed three years earlier, immediately suspended the striking constables; but faced with widespread hostility, not to mention middle-class concern for the security of property, he was very soon forced to reinstate the men.<sup>67</sup> Keen to reach a settlement, the government agreed to raise constables' wages from 18 to 24 shillings a week and to lower slightly the maximum period of service. However, this failed to address the men's key concerns, which were the right to receive a pension, the unfavorable scales that had been introduced in 1862, and the period required to receive the maximum amount.<sup>68</sup> Efforts to persuade the

<sup>63</sup>V. Allen, "The National Union of Police and Prison Officers," *Economic History Review* 11 (1958): 133-143.

<sup>64</sup>*Daily Telegraph*, 17 Oct. 1872.

<sup>65</sup>*Daily News*, 10 July 1872; *Daily Telegraph*, 18 July 1872.

<sup>66</sup>Monro, *The Story of Police Pensions*, 199.

<sup>67</sup>*Daily Telegraph*, 19 Nov. 1872; *Sunday Times*, 24 Nov. 1872; *Morning Post*, 29 Nov. 1872; *Lloyds Illustrated Newspaper*, 8 June 1890.

<sup>68</sup>The pension struggle is explained in Monro, *The Story of Police Pensions*. Monro was appointed commissioner of the Metropolitan Police in 1889 but resigned in 1890 over a disagreement with Home Secretary Henry Matthews. See *Daily Telegraph*, 13 June 1890.

government to create a select committee to investigate the pension fund were resisted, and it was not until 1875 that one was eventually created to consider the funding of the superannuation scheme.<sup>69</sup>

The committee's remit included other police superannuation schemes, and it received detailed actuarial evidence from William Farr about the likely cost of reforming the pension regulations. Farr pointed out that almost every police pension fund in the country was either insolvent or would soon become so without additional funds. In fact, the Metropolitan Police pension fund had been insolvent almost from its inception in 1839. The fund was primarily financed by compulsory deductions from policemen's pay amounting to between 2 and 2½ percent of salary, depending on grade, together with income from fines and the sale of old police clothing. The money was supposed to be invested in secure Bank of England consols, with the revenue used to fund pensions, but in practice the fund operated from hand to mouth, using current income to pay out benefits without any form of reinvestment. As a result, within 10 years of its formation, the fund was insolvent, and by 1856 it was technically bankrupt. Beset by poor financial management and burdened with relatively young and comparatively long-lived beneficiaries, it was little wonder that the fund was regularly in deficit. The only way that the police authorities were able to limit the cost of the pensions, therefore, was to control the number of policemen signed off for incapacity, and sickness monitoring and management were key aspects of this strategy.

The committee eventually submitted a report in 1877, proposing reforms that were aimed at addressing some of the men's concerns and that placed the pension funds on a more secure financial footing by making them a charge upon local property rates.<sup>70</sup> The committee recommended that men who had served for 15 years or more should be eligible to a pension subject to obtaining a certificate of permanent incapacity, while those who had served for at least 25 years should be able to claim a pension by right. They also recommended a sliding scale of benefits that increased for those who had served at least 20 years, a clear attempt to encourage more experienced men to remain in their posts after they first became eligible for a pension. If their initial claim to a pension had been refused, policemen also gained the right to appeal to justices of the peace at the quarter sessions courts, which were held four times a year. The government response, however, was to adopt the new scale of benefits but to do little else. In 1881, the new home secretary, Sir

<sup>69</sup> *Illustrated Police News*, 16 May 1874; *The Times*, 2 March 1875; *Dundee Courier*, 5 March 1875.

<sup>70</sup> Report from the Select Committee on Police Superannuation Funds, British Parliamentary Paper, XV (Cmd. 158), x-xii.



Figure 5. Proportion of workforce serving for 15 years or more. (Source: Annual Report of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, 1870-1902.)

William Harcourt, promised further reform, but nothing more came of it, and it was not until 1890 that further pension reforms took place.

For the men, the reforms of 1877 failed to address their primary grievance, which was the right to receive a pension without the need to prove incapacity before serving the limit of 25 years. However, for the police authorities, the sliding scale of benefits for long service appeared to have had the desired effect. Figure 5 shows the proportion of the workforce in employment for 15 years or longer, and the impact of the changes is clear. In 1877, 17.5 percent of police pensioners had served at least 15 years in the force, but by 1890, this had risen to nearly 28 percent, a level that was maintained until the late 1890s.<sup>71</sup>

While the likely impact of pension changes would have been to persuade policemen to remain in their posts for longer, Dr. McKellar was also keen to suggest that another reason for the improved retention rates was the stricter attention paid to reducing spurious claims for a pension on medical grounds. During the initial period of absence, a divisional surgeon would be expected to examine the man at least three or four times a week, or indeed every day depending on the urgency of the case.<sup>72</sup> Every man whose sickness extended beyond 28 days had to be

<sup>71</sup> Figures for the size of the authorized workforce are taken from the annual reports of the commissioner for the Metropolitan Police (1870-1901).

<sup>72</sup> Departmental Committee of 1889 upon Metropolitan Police Superannuation, q. 1340-1363



reviewed by Dr. McKellar himself, and this, he argued, was an effective way of reducing dubious claims. He told the Departmental Committee on Superannuation:

I look very closely indeed into a man's fitness or unfitness, if I find that he has 15 years' service, I perhaps suspect something, and I watch that man, and if I do not consider him unfit I communicate with the divisional surgeon and say "I should like further observation of that man."<sup>73</sup>

Stricter medical examinations might have made some difference but the shift in behavior predated McKellar's appointment and therefore was more likely to have been the result of changes in the pension scales introduced in 1877 rather than greater vigilance by police surgeons. Despite ongoing dissatisfaction with the right to obtain a pension, a more paternalistic and less confrontational approach by the police authorities, which Shpayer-Makov claims helped improve industrial relations, might also have contributed to better rates of retention, but the most likely explanation for the changes in the pattern of retirement were the structural alterations to the pension regulations.<sup>74</sup>

Without fundamental reforms of the right to receive a pension and more generous scales that recognized the fact that virtually no policeman ever remained in his post long enough to gain the maximum pension, payable only after 28 years' service, dissatisfaction continued.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, despite government promises to reform the system, no changes in the financial arrangements were made, and without financial reforms the superannuation fund continued to be insolvent. By 1890, according to James Monro, there was no capital left to be invested and the pension fund, which included deductions from policemen's pay, was technically bankrupt.<sup>76</sup>

Matters were brought to a head in 1890 when changes to pension benefits for the City of London police and unrest in the Metropolitan Police prompted reform. In January 1890, a new superannuation act was introduced for the City of London police force that recognized the right to receive a full pension for those men over age 50 who had served at least 25 years.<sup>77</sup> This change was the catalyst for further unrest in the Metropolitan Police, with renewed demands by the men who claimed that virtually no officer was able to work for longer than 25 years, which

<sup>73</sup> Departmental Committee of 1889 upon Metropolitan Police Superannuation, q. 1509.

<sup>74</sup> Shpayer-Makov, *Making of a Policeman*, 172–174.

<sup>75</sup> Monro, *Story of Police Pensions*, 202–203.

<sup>76</sup> Monro, *Story of Police Pensions*, 197, 200.

<sup>77</sup> *The Times*, 19 April 1890.

meant that it was impossible for them to ever receive a full pension.<sup>78</sup> The police commissioner, James Monro, was sympathetic to the men's claims and had urged Home Secretary Henry Matthews to consider their request favorably. However, Matthews was resistant to the claims, and when at the same time he chose to appoint his own private secretary as the new assistant commissioner of Police in place of Monro's preferred candidate, Monro himself resigned.<sup>79</sup> The government's refusal to discuss anything other than limited pension reforms, coupled with Monro's resignation, prompted further unrest among the rank-and-file policemen. Against a background of "new unionism" and widespread unrest in many trades in London and elsewhere, meetings of the men took place throughout the city in support of more fundamental reform. In Southwark, two leaders of the protest were suspended, leading to a threatened strike unless the men were reinstated on the force.<sup>80</sup> Large gatherings of off-duty policemen took place throughout June and July outside Bow Street station, leading to further suspensions, and when the new Metropolitan Police commissioner, Sir Edward Bradford, who had only just taken up the post following James Monro's resignation, called in the Life Guards and mounted police to restore order, violent confrontations took place.<sup>81</sup> Although one commentator, who was in touch with the men, claimed that "the police will not go to the Socialists for guidance and leadership," there was some fear that at a time of general labor unrest, leaving London's streets unguarded was a risky strategy.<sup>82</sup>

Mindful of the unrest that existed, the government hastily amended the terms of the proposed reforms to police pensions that were then making their way through Parliament, responding both to the pension scheme's financial problems and policemen's complaints about the unattainable service requirement. Drawing on new duties on beer and spirits introduced by chancellor of the exchequer George Goschen's budget, the government implemented new arrangements, making direct contributions to the pension fund, which ensured its financial viability and aligning it more closely to Treasury-funded schemes like that of the Civil Service.<sup>83</sup> Among other benefits, policemen gained the right to

<sup>78</sup> Monro, *Story of Police Pensions*, 202–203.

<sup>79</sup> Monro, *Story of Police Pensions*, 204–205; *Lloyds Illustrated Newspaper*, 8 June 1890; *The Times*, 13 June 1890; *Daily Telegraph*, 14 June 1890.

<sup>80</sup> *The Standard*, 24 June 1890.

<sup>81</sup> *The Standard*, 2 July 1890; *The Times*, 7 July 1890; *York Herald*, 7 July 1890; *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 1890. There is no evidence that policemen were involved in the "new unionism" of the late 1880s. The strike in 1890 might have been associated with the general sentiments regarding the rights of labor, but the claims were focused specifically on pensions and pay, and the catalyst for the actual strike was the victimization of the policemen's leader.

<sup>82</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 14 June 1890.

<sup>83</sup> The Police Act of 1890, 53 & 54 Vict. c. 45. See also Shpayer-Makov, *Making of a Policeman*, 174–176.

retire on a full pension after 25 years' instead of 28 years' service, one of the men's principal requests, and they no longer had to prove ill health in order to retire earlier, bringing them in line with the new arrangements for the City of London police. The Act also provided widows' pensions and children's allowances for officers who died as a result of injury sustained while on duty, and for those who died for other reasons while still in service. In both cases, this new benefit recognized that a pension was, in fact, partly deferred pay, and that dependents of serving policemen who had contributed a portion of their pay should be eligible to receive part of that contribution. With the right to receive a pension now recognized in law, and with improvements for policemen's families, the unrest that had accompanied the passage of the initial reforms through Parliament subsided as the new arrangements started to be introduced.

The new arrangements meant that policemen no longer had to convince a sometimes-reluctant police surgeon about fitness to serve in order to claim a pension. As a result, from 1891, when the new pension arrangements came into force, the annual number of retirees more than doubled, as indicated in Table 1. At the same time, the average length of service increased from 22.4 years in 1881 to 25.1 years in 1891, suggesting that the prospect of receiving a full pension at an earlier stage persuaded more officers to continue at least until they had served 25 years or longer. Rather than the stricter surveillance of sickness, which Dr. McKellar claimed was responsible for reducing the numbers of men who signed off prematurely as permanently incapacitated, the promise of receiving a full pension at an earlier age seemed to have had a greater influence on the decision to remain at work for longer.

### Working Lives beyond Retirement

The ability to retire with a pension, whether it be by personal choice, incapacity, or because of specific bureaucratic rules, was rare for working-class individuals in nineteenth-century Britain.<sup>84</sup> Even for those who were fortunate enough to receive a pension, including the police, the amount was not necessarily sufficient to allow retirees to live an independent life without the need to continue to work. For policemen, the right to claim a pension was important, but for many the actual decision to remain working would also have depended on their ability to maintain a sufficient income after retirement. In order to provide an idea of the kind of post-retirement lives Metropolitan

<sup>84</sup>See Pat Thane, "The Experience of Retirement in Britain, Past and Present," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 22 (2011): 13–32.

Table 2  
Percentage of Policemen Having an Occupation in the Census  
after Retiring, the Mean Age at Retirement and Length of  
Service, 1878, 1881, 1891.

Year (%)	Occupation post-retirement	No occupation post-retirement	Number
1878	45	56	26
1881	52	48	25
1891	42	58	60
Age at retirement (mean)			
1878	46.3	46.7	
1881	45.1	46.7	
1891	46.7	49.2	
Length of service (mean)			
1878	21.3	24.2	
1881	21.5	23.1	
1891	25.3	26.3	

Source: Metropolitan Police Pension records, England and Wales censuses.  
Notes: 1878 retirees found in the 1881 census, 1881 retirees in the 1891 census and 1891 retirees in the 1901 census. Any occupation other than variations on “pensioner” taken to be an alternative occupation.

policemen experienced, we traced a sub-sample of pensioners who retired in 1878, 1881, and 1891—years that spanned the major pension reform in 1890—in the census years after they retired.<sup>85</sup> We traced a total of 111 individuals, representing a 15 percent sample of retirees; and although the numbers are small, they are indicative of wider trends that appear to have been relatively stable over time. Table 2 shows the number of policemen who held a different job in the census after they retired as well as various other characteristics. The 1878 figures are not strictly comparable to the 1881 and 1891 data because the census in question was just three years later, rather than 10 years later. The census being closer to the retirement date might have increased the number of workers who could be traced with alternative occupations compared to the 1881 and 1891 retirees. However, even with this issue, there is little variation in the share we found in alternative employment post-retirement in the different years, with between 42 and 52 percent of retirees having some kind of occupation after retiring from the Metropolitan Police, which was a considerably lower percentage than for similar aged groups of workers as a whole, suggesting that having a pension in the first place was an important determinant in the initial

<sup>85</sup>The policemen we traced were randomly chosen from those who retired in each year and who were known to be alive at the next census.

decision to seek employment after retiring from service.<sup>86</sup> There was also little difference in the age at retirement, though in each year workers who appear in the census with an occupation after retirement appeared to have been slightly younger and have had shorter careers in the police. The main difference over time, however, came in the length of service, with those retiring in 1891 working between about three and four years longer than retirees in earlier years. It appears, therefore, that the main impact of the 1890 reforms was to persuade workers who were approaching the end of their careers to remain in their posts longer than they would have done under the old regulations.

Several of the jobs held by policemen after retirement utilized some of their expertise, such as doorkeeper, gatekeeper, and night watchman, but many such as commercial clerk, farmer, general shopkeeper, and sub-postmaster were distinct and seemingly unrelated to their original work in the police. Presumably, these differences were related to personal circumstances, family needs, the opportunities provided by local labor markets and any money or property that they possessed. Tracking these individuals across later census years shows that several individuals who returned to an occupation immediately post-retirement subsequently described themselves as “pensioners,” suggesting that while retirees found new occupations after leaving the police force, when they likely were still physically able to work, they then fell back on the pension later in life. Therefore, while the pension theoretically offered freedom from labor for policemen who had served in the Metropolitan Police for more than two decades, for many the level of income provided by a pension after retirement was insufficient and needed to be supplemented by additional work. Whether out of necessity or choice, therefore, many policemen continued to work and only became true “pensioners” perhaps as much as 20 years after retiring from police work, when their other labor had ceased and their reliance on their pension, together perhaps with the status of being a retired policeman, was of sufficient importance to be declared on their census return.

### Conclusion

There was no doubt that policing was a dangerous occupation with the threat of violence and injury a constant concern. But alongside these risks, the poor health that plagued policemen as they went about their duties was all too evident in the numbers of men who took time off sick and retired early. Policemen wore out fast and were understandably

<sup>86</sup>See Paul Johnson, “The Employment and Retirement of Older Men in England and Wales, 1881–1981,” *Economic History Review* 47 (1994): 106–128.

concerned about their right to receive a pension, which for much of the period under study remained at the discretion of the employers. Financial stringency that resulted in a reduction in pension benefits generated industrial unrest on two notable occasions in 1872 and 1890, which focused on claims for improved pension arrangements. Reforms followed these periods of labor activism with varying degrees of success. On the first occasion, the government listened and made limited changes, but on the second it enacted more fundamental reforms to improve pension rights and safeguard the financial health of the pension fund.

In the wider context about managing the workforce, the disputes over pension arrangements reflected two contradictory needs. On the one hand, policemen required flexibility, allowing them to take a pension when convenient rather than when permitted to do so by bureaucratic rules regarding eligibility imposed by the employer. On the other, the police employers required stability and used the promise of a pension to achieve that aim. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the reforms that reduced the qualifying period to receive the maximum pension may have acted to lengthen the period of service by persuading those nearing the end of their career to remain in their posts, thereby helping to retain experienced men, a key consideration on the part of the police authorities.

Casting our gaze more widely, this article has argued that bureaucratic departments of the state, such as the police, bore some important similarities with the large private business enterprise that emerged in the late nineteenth century as the scale and scope of commercial activity expanded. In particular, the monitoring, coordination, and planning of operations, and the allocation of resources, depended on the existence of a permanent, salaried hierarchy of civil servants, on the one hand, and managers, on the other hand. In the case of the police, employees with different ranks peopled the hierarchy, but in other respects their responsibilities were similar to managers in large business enterprises. Though not involved directly in capitalist competition, nevertheless the efficiency and productivity of the police were subject to constant surveillance and monitoring. The detailed annual reports of the Metropolitan Police commissioner provided the equivalent of the "balance sheet" of activities and expenditure more typical of the modern business enterprise. These annual reports took into account both the income arising from policing operations and the costs to the organization of providing the service. This information, gathered on a regular and more frequent basis than just the annual reports, fed into management decisions about allocating resources to different elements of its operations. A key aspect of this was the costs of managing the labor force, not just through the formal wage but through other non-wage benefits aimed at retaining experienced staff and

maintaining long-term stability. As such, the police can be compared to the modern business enterprise in which similar considerations and responses were evident. Indeed, to see state bureaucracies such as the police as different from the large corporations of late-nineteenth-century managerial capitalism is to miss what they both had in common.

. . .

DAVID GREEN<sup>1b</sup>, *Professor of Historical Geography, King's College London, London, UK*

*Professor Green's interests span a range of subjects, including histories of welfare, wealth, urban, and economic change. He is currently leading a research project investigating health in the nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century British Post Office.*

DOUGLAS BROWN, *Senior Lecturer in Geographic Information Systems and Human Geography, Kingston University, London, UK*

*Dr. Brown (1977–2021) was a senior lecturer in geographic information systems and human geography at Kingston University. In addition to his doctoral research on the poor law, he was also involved in studying morbidity in the British Post Office and the police. Dr. Brown passed away before a draft of this article had been prepared, but he was instrumental in shaping the ideas and providing the data.*

HARRY SMITH<sup>1b</sup>, *Research Fellow, Department of History, Exeter University, Exeter, Devon, UK*

*Dr. Smith is working on a project relating to the material culture of English wills in the early modern period. He has previously worked on the history of the professions and entrepreneurship and on mortality and morbidity in the British Post Office.*

JOE CHICK<sup>1b</sup>, *Research Fellow, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK*

*Dr. Chick is interested in long-term trends in social history from the medieval period to the present day, and his first monograph looked at the impact of the dissolution of the monasteries on towns under monastic lordship.*



*NATASHA PREGER, Ph.D. Candidate, King's College London, London, UK*

*Ms. Preger's doctoral research focuses on the life cycle of employment in the nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century British Post Office and strategies relating to managing the workforce.*