

# Independent police oversight institutions: new developments and international comparison

**DR HARTMUT ADEN, THE BERLIN SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND LAW**

Wednesday 22 February: 12pm to 1pm

Venue: Room 4.13, St George's Building, St Thomas's Street, PO1 2HY ([map](#))

## Abstract

Policing has regularly led to conflicts between the police and groups of citizens. Policing political protest and socially disadvantaged urban areas are typical examples of situations that have repeatedly escalated to riots in the past. However, over the past decades, police agencies in many western countries are under pressure to solve problems in a more de-escalating way and to prevent conflicts. The accountability of policing, including lawful police behaviour and high professional standards, has become an important issue.

The presentation will assess different governance strategies that have been developed in a number of major US cities, in Germany and in other European countries in order to prevent or resolve conflicts between the police and citizens. The governance strategies in this field vary considerably. Some security agencies only have “conventional” internal administrative instruments to deal with problems that occur with the public, such as investigation by seniors in the administrative hierarchy and dedicated internal investigation units. In other cases, independent ombudsman bodies or committees composed by citizens or experts have been established in order to deal with complaints by citizens in a more neutral way. However, if these bodies are too detached from police practice, the success of such kinds of independent governance approaches may be endangered. Police agencies may refuse access to the relevant information needed for investigation, or they may ignore the recommendations issued by such independent bodies.

Variation can also be observed in the extent of investigation authority that such kind of bodies have. Victims of police violence sometimes demand criminal sanctions for the police officers responsible for unlawful behaviour. However, the mission of independent complaint bodies is somewhat different from criminal investigation being more preventatively oriented, for example. Therefore, in some cases, criminal investigation is strictly separate from the preventative work of independent complaint bodies.

Other governance strategies combine the functions of an external complaint-handling body with processes for dealing with internal complaints by police officers, e.g. in relation to bullying or other forms of malpractice. Complaint institutions of this type have recently been established in some German states.

Variation is also connected to the administrative status of police organisations. While in continental European countries, police agencies are mostly state administrations, decentralised municipal police departments play a much more important role in the US. Independent complaint and investigation bodies may be easier to implement in municipal police departments than in centralised police organisations based on a complex internal hierarchy.

Against this backdrop, the presentation will discuss advantages and inconveniences of different models and governance strategies that have been developed in order to improve police accountability towards the public.