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# Desistance from criminalisation: police culture and new directions in drugs policing

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## ABSTRACT

Globally, there is emerging evidence that drugs policing is moving away from traditional enforcement interventions towards a greater focus on harm reduction. Signs of a shift include alternatives to criminalisation in the form of police-led diversion schemes. This article examines the extent to which new directions in drugs policing reflect changes in police culture. The key change under consideration is police desistance from criminalising people who use drugs. Another aim is to advance theoretical debates into the factors affecting cultural change in police organisations. Drawing on an extensive qualitative study of challenges, innovation and reform in drugs policing across England and Wales, the findings capture the transformative effect of certain experiences on the values police officers hold and how they understand and make sense of drug problems, their role and impact. It is argued that further insights into cultural change can be gained by drawing on the concept of turning points from life-course criminology and desistance research. The findings also reveal how changes in the field of policing have fostered and facilitated changes in police culture and practice. A policy implication of this study is that cultural change could be furthered through experiential learning and critical reflective practice approaches to police education.

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policing; police role; reform;  
turning points

## Introduction

“Certain experiences, certain stories will change the way you see policing ... It will just change your viewpoint almost instantly, where you just go fuck, you know, I understand it now, or I’ve never seen it from that point of view before, or I cannot understand how all of those events have basically resulted in this.” (Police\_Officer#1E)

Drugs policing is a notoriously complex and contentious domain that brings into sharp focus the multifaceted nature of the police role. It is an ‘impossible mandate’ (Manning 1997), characterised by goal conflicts and a miscellany of tasks, from fighting organised crime to helping people with substance use disorders. Owing to the dominant ideologies and institutions of the global prohibition regime, drugs policing has long centred on law enforcement and punitive interventions that seek to reduce the production, supply and use of controlled drugs through deterrence and criminal sanctions (Pryce 2012, Wood 2016). The attention given to this approach has tended to obscure the wider purpose of drugs policing and the public health functions of the police.

Over recent years, however, there has been much recognition that the human costs of the so-called ‘war on drugs’ are outweighing the benefits. The ineffectiveness and damaging impact of

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the drug war on aspects of crime, health, human rights and social inequality have been extensively documented (Csete *et al.* 2016, Rolles *et al.* 2016). For example, there is a lack of evidence as to whether vigorously enforcing prohibition serves as a deterrent to drug use, but an abundance on the harmful consequences of repressive policing and criminalising people for simple possession offences, particularly when it results in incarceration. These consequences include stigmatisation, marginalisation and restriction of education, employment and housing prospects, as well as disrupting the provision of health care and increasing risk behaviour associated with infectious disease transmission and overdose.

There are diverging views on drug policy among the international community and change is afoot in many parts of the world (Bewley-Taylor 2012, Hall 2018). Globally, alternatives to criminalisation for possession of illicit drugs have materialised via a range of depenalisation, diversion and decriminalisation measures (Eastwood *et al.* 2016, Stevens *et al.* 2019). In Europe, Colson and Bergeron's (2017) edited collection traces a gradual policy convergence and the emergence of a model favouring public health strategies over a strictly penal approach to drug problems. Cannabis prohibition has become progressively fragmented, since Uruguay, Canada and numerous states in the USA decided to regulate the market for recreational use (Seddon and Floodgate 2020).

Against this backdrop, there is emerging evidence that drugs policing is moving away from traditional enforcement responses towards a greater focus on harm reduction (UKDPC 2009, Bacon 2016, Krupanski 2018, Kammersgaard 2019, Spicer 2021). Harm reduction policing is broadly defined here as measures that aim to reduce the adverse health, social and legal consequences of drug use, drug markets and efforts to control them through the criminal justice system. Signs of a shift, both in police culture and practice, are apparent in burgeoning police-led diversion schemes that offer alternatives to arrest, prosecution and/or a criminal record by addressing drug use and associated problems through education, treatment programmes and/or social support (Beckett 2016, Hughes *et al.* 2019, Spyt *et al.* 2019). Other indicators include the carrying of naloxone by front-line officers and police support for harm reduction services, such as needle exchange programmes, heroin-assisted treatment, drug consumption rooms and drug safety testing (Monaghan and Bewley-Taylor 2013, Krupanski 2018, Lurigio *et al.* 2018, Kammersgaard 2019, Measham 2019).

The factors driving these new directions in drug policy and policing are many, varying between specific initiatives, countries and localities. They operate through 'combinations of contexts and mechanisms within the structural and cultural conditions of social systems' (Stevens *et al.* 2019, p. 4). In their realist review and programme theory of alternatives to criminalisation for simple drug possession, Stevens *et al.* (2019) argue that the culture and priorities of the police provide an important context because they affect implementation. My research supports their argument and extends it by demonstrating that the police can be a driver of reform. In England and Wales, where there is no immediate prospect of drug law reform and national policy remains steadfastly committed to criminal justice approaches, a number of police forces and police and crime commissioners (PCCs) are challenging the status quo and bringing about change to police practice at a local level. This is an especially interesting reform dynamic because the initiatives in question have been internally driven by the police rather than externally imposed on the police. Noteworthy examples include Avon and Somerset's *Drug Education Programme* (Luckwell 2017), Durham's *Checkpoint* (Weir *et al.* 2019), North Wales' *Drugs Policy 2020* (Jones 2020), Thames Valley's *Drug Diversion Scheme Pilot* (Spyt *et al.* 2019) and the *West Midlands Drug Policy Recommendations* (Jamieson 2018).

Police culture is often portrayed as a barrier to reform (Chan 1997, Loftus 2009, Campeau 2019). However, the very existence of new directions in drugs policing emerging from within police organisations indicates receptivity to change. What I wish to explore here is the extent to which these recent changes in police practice reflect changes in police culture. Achieving this purpose requires an in-depth analysis of the values police officers hold and how they understand and make sense of drug problems, their role and impact. It is also necessary to examine how and why cultural change is both realised and resisted. The abovementioned 'unsettled times' in the drugs field present a fruitful

opportunity to revisit police culture as officers are 'forced to either demonstrate commitment to past strategies of action or develop new ones' (Campeau 2015, p. 674).

The key change under consideration is police desistance from criminalising people who use drugs. 'Desistance' is used in a literal sense to mean cessation of criminalisation via formal sanctions and informal labelling. My intention is to take the concept from its home in life-course criminology and flip it from being about why people stop offending to why police stop criminalising people who commit drug offences. This element of the article is not an attempt to rigorously apply theories developed to explain desistance from crime to processes of change in policing. The goal is to think about how the underlying conceptual framework of desistance research can be used to enhance understanding of changes in police officer perspectives and patterns of behaviour (for an overview of desistance research and theoretical perspectives see Shapland and Bottoms 2017, Weaver 2019). Particular attention is given to the concept of 'turning points'. These decisive moments generally involve events that act as a stimulus for individuals and redirect their persistent trajectory (Sampson and Laub 1993, Schinkel 2019). Returning to the opening quotation, my research shines a light on 'certain experiences, certain stories' that change the way police officers see drugs policing.

This article draws on an extensive qualitative study of challenges, innovation and reform in drugs policing across England and Wales. The next section reviews the relevant police culture and drugs policing literature. It aims to define police culture, set out the key concepts employed to understand cultural continuity and change in police organisations, and make novel connections with life-course criminology and desistance research. After outlining the research methods, the findings commence by delving into the experiences, stories and turning points that are driving cultural change. The following section addresses how changes in the field have fostered and facilitated police desistance from criminalisation. These changes include police budget cuts, trends in evidence-based policing, the wider vulnerability agenda and the introduction of PCCs. The discussion then moves on to account for cultural conflict and continuity. Implications for policy and future research are considered in the conclusion.

## **Making sense of police culture: a conceptual toolkit**

The term police culture is typically used to encapsulate the ensemble of values, beliefs and norms shared by the police. Skolnick (1966) was one of the first scholars to identify the 'cognitive lenses' through which police officers see people, situations and events. Holdaway (1983, p. 2) likened police culture to a 'reservoir of knowledge about police work on which variations in individual style and specialisms draw'. Cultural knowledge, core and peripheral characteristics, are rooted in, shaped by and adapted to the basic pressures, recurrent problems and unique experiences of the police mandate (Bowling *et al.* 2019, Cockcroft 2020).

Police culture plays a significant role in shaping how officers view their social world and approach their work. In relation to drugs policing, existing literature suggests that the police have been anchored in a 'tough on drugs' mentality for decades, perceiving their primary role as being to enforce the law and process offenders through the criminal justice system (Bacon 2016, Wood 2016). According to Small (2005, p. 221), the 'conviction that enforcement can and should stop drug use is central in the police web of cultural values'. People who use drugs, especially those with addiction problems, have long been categorised as 'police property' (Lee 1981, p. 53), a term used to describe those marginal groups 'over whom the police successfully exert superior power' (see Loftus 2009). Further barriers to reforming the way the police think about and respond to drugs include: negative stereotypes of drug users; limited knowledge and understanding of drug use, harm reduction and pathways to recovery; and a lack of confidence in treatment and social services (e.g. Spooner *et al.* 2004, Wood *et al.* 2013, Murphy and Russell 2020).

While such attitudes persist in police worldviews, it is important to stress that they are neither universal nor static (Bacon 2016, Marks *et al.* 2017). Indeed, research on recent trends in drugs

policing, where alternatives to criminalisation and harm reduction measures have been implemented, indicates that cultural change is possible and happening. In Australia, for example, where over the past two decades all states and territories have adopted diversion as a substitute to enforcement, there is broad support from police services but 'cultural resistance and beliefs that diversion is a "soft option" can and do remain' (Hughes *et al.* 2019, p. 50). In the USA, some officers are supportive of Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) programmes because it represents a tool to help people in need, whereas others view it as outside the scope of their functions, letting drug offenders 'off the hook' and enabling addiction (Collins *et al.* 2015, Beckett 2016, Worden and McLean 2018). Kammersgaard (2019) argues that the partial decriminalisation of drug possession that followed the introduction of drug consumption rooms in Copenhagen enabled a shift in the logic of policing whereby people who use drugs could be more readily perceived as citizens with rights, rather than simply offenders.

Police culture is not the analytic focus of this emerging and discrete body of literature though. The authors do not unpack the conceptual baggage or provide a sophisticated analysis of why, how and to what extent cultural change has occurred. My goal is to fill this knowledge gap by putting police culture front and centre in a discussion of new directions in drugs policing.

Theoretically, the vast sea of literature on police culture can be difficult to navigate. My work draws on previous studies that push the concept in new directions by bringing into play the sociology of culture and organisational theory to capture nuance behind the cultural knowledge police officers deploy as they deal with the ambiguities and complexities of their occupational duties (Chan 1997, Herbert 1998, Campeau 2015, 2019). Rather than taking a reductionist approach that seeks to isolate cultural traits, identify typologies of policing styles or a mishmash of (sub)cultures, following Campeau (2015), police culture is understood here to be a set of 'resources' that officers use to make sense of their experiences and harness for action. Herbert (1998, p. 346) puts forward a similarly useful definition of culture as 'a grab bag of assorted schemas, tools, and frames, which are reflexively adapted by active agents to new and uncertain scenarios'.

A key feature of the aforesaid studies is the emphasis given to subjectivity and human agency. 'The police' are a heterogeneous social group. Police officers have their own personalities, unique characteristics and bring with them orientations from their past experiences. Applying the social theory of Bourdieu, Chan (1997, p. 74) puts police actors at the centre of her interactive model of the production of police practice. Working within the structural conditions of policing, Chan argues that members of police organisations play an active role in 'developing, reinforcing, resisting or transforming cultural knowledge and institutionalised practice' (p. 225). Chan equates 'cultural knowledge' with Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'. 'Structural conditions' – or the 'field', to use Bourdieusian terminology – include the police organisational context and the external social, political and economic environment within which policing is situated. In another Bourdieu-inspired analysis, Pichonnaz (2021) suggests that divisions within police culture can be explained by socialisation prior to joining the police. Studying individual officers – their dispositions, personal narratives, social identity, and means through which they put their repertoire of cultural resources to work – is therefore vital to a dynamic, richly textured account of police culture and the inner-workings of police organisations. Examining shifts in officer perspectives and orientations is another important but neglected element of understanding changes in police culture and practice (Charman 2017, Marks *et al.* 2017).

This is where I argue that further insights can be gained by drawing on concepts from life-course criminology and desistance research. In particular, the concept of 'turning points' is useful for explaining change in police attitudes and behaviours. Turning points involve a key event, experience or new awareness that results in changes in the direction of an individual's pathway (Sampson and Laub 1993, Schinkel 2019). For some, turning points may be the result of a dramatic event that brings about abrupt changes, while for others, factors contributing to turning points are more incremental, accumulating over time until an 'epiphany' moment triggers lasting behavioural change (Denzin 1989). Common turning points identified in the desistance literature include employment, marriage

and parenthood. Giordano *et al.*'s (2002) theory of cognitive transformation is also applicable, especially the analogous concept of 'hooks for change', opportunities presented by the broader environment that are appropriated by actors who are 'open to change' to develop new identities. It is worth noting that Giordano *et al.* (2002, p. 1004) thought their theory 'may have some general utility, to the degree that it provides more specificity about mechanisms of change'. My goal is to identify turning points that lead police officers towards desistance from criminalising people who use drugs.

The concept of turning points can be fruitfully employed to examine individual trajectories and shared patterns of change. However, more equipment is needed in the conceptual toolkit to get a comprehensive understanding of continuity and change in police culture. To analyse the complexity of culture and the reflexivity of cultural actors, Herbert (1998) develops the concept of 'normative order', which he defines as 'a set of generalized rules and common practices oriented around a common value' (p. 347). He argues that six normative orders fundamentally structure the social world of the police – law, bureaucratic control, adventure/machismo, safety, competence, and morality. Each of these orders provides officers with guidelines and justifications for actions. This approach is useful because it enables us to understand change both for an organisation and for individual officers. Police forces may shift in terms of the balance between normative orders in their policies, procedures and strategies. Individuals may change which orders they mobilise to define situations and determine their response. Another benefit of Herbert's analytic concept is that it can account for cohesion and conflict.

Campeau's (2019) account of cultural inertia in the context of shifting demographics and policy reforms enhances understandings of internal differentiation and the mobilisation of cultural resources in police organisations. Lines of division are said to reflect generational boundaries. Though these differences were often reflected in age and seniority, the terms 'old-school' and 'new-generation' are used to represent the cultural scripts adopted by officers. Campeau argues that the status quo is sustained by high-rank old-school officers through a balancing of cultural scripts and the preservation of institutional myths. Such myths are 'widespread understandings of social reality which possess an intrinsic quality of "truth" about them' (p. 72). They are often used to justify ways of doing things and once institutionalised in routine practices take on a rule-like status in social thought and action. However, her findings demonstrate that the dominance of the old-school mentality grows increasingly precarious as the reigning myths lose legitimacy for the new generation.

In her longitudinal study of police socialisation, identity and culture, Charman (2017) likewise found that new cultural resources began to take shape as a 'new breed' of police officer entered an institution in flux, most notably compassion, empathy and community service principles. She suggests that these changes stem from changes to the field of policing, where the focus is now much more on public protection, reassurance and safeguarding. She also suggests that they reflect a 'changing acceptance of the new *narratives* surrounding the role of the police' (p. 337). Narratives and storytelling are central to understandings of police culture and cultural change. Shearing and Ericson (1991) argue that the police use storytelling to communicate cultural knowledge about the craft of policing. Police stories provide officers with 'ready-made schemas and scripts' (Chan 1997, p. 70). They are an important part of the meaning-making structure that shapes identity, ideological frames, perceptions of social problems, and responses to them. Narrative processes serve as a source of legitimation for police practices or call them into question (Kurtz and Colburn 2019, van Hulst 2019).

## Research methods

An exploratory qualitative approach was taken to study police culture and new directions in drugs policing. Initially, in order to identify examples of harm reduction policing, I examined a range of policy documents and official reports, including HM Government's (2017a) drug strategy, relevant

National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) publications and Police and Crime Plans for all service areas. Police websites, news media sources and information requests via professional networks were also included in this search activity. My focus was on alternatives to criminalisation in the form of police-led diversion schemes for people who use drugs and drug-related crime. Police-led diversion schemes are complex and differ between service areas. For the most part, the schemes function within the framework for out of court disposals (NPCC 2017). Notable examples are Avon and Somerset's *Drug Education Programme*, Durham's *Checkpoint*, Thames Valley's *Drug Diversion Scheme Pilot* and West Midlands' *Turning Point* (Spyt *et al.* 2019). Further intersections between policing and public health included in the search criteria were the carrying of naloxone by front-line officers and police support for heroin-assisted treatment, drug consumption rooms and drug safety testing. Police forces were invited to participate in the research if one or more of these initiatives were in operation, being piloted or on the strategic agenda.

The study involved multi-method data collection. Fieldwork was undertaken across different regions of England and Wales between May 2018 and October 2019. The main strand of the methodology comprised 81 semi-structured interviews. Most took place in Avon and Somerset ( $n=16$ ), Cleveland ( $n=8$ ), Cumbria ( $n=7$ ), Durham ( $n=8$ ), London ( $n=17$ ), Thames Valley ( $n=13$ ) and the West Midlands ( $n=6$ ), though interviews were also carried out in Derbyshire ( $n=1$ ), North Wales ( $n=1$ ), South Yorkshire ( $n=2$ ) and West Mercia ( $n=2$ ). Police service areas are not identified in the findings in order to protect confidentiality. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and ranged from 30 min to nearly 3 h in duration. In total, over 92 h of audio recordings were produced, which were transcribed verbatim. Documents, both publically available and internal, were collected and analysed during fieldwork to inform interview design and provide insights into objectives, evidence-based practice, risk management techniques and the outcomes of harm reduction policing measures. These included business cases, briefings, evaluation reports, organisational mission statements and press releases.

Purposive sampling was used to select interviewees based on their knowledge, experience and expertise, followed by a process of snowballing. While using this type of sampling does not provide the foundation for generalisable results, it had the advantage of enabling access to the key police actors behind the development and implementation of new directions in drugs policing. Participants varied between initiatives, spanned the police ranks and worked across a wide range of roles. They included chief officers, force drugs leads, custody sergeants and members of specialist proactive units and neighbourhood policing teams (police officers/staff  $n=46/3$ ). PCCs and their teams were included in the sample, owing to their role in police governance, policy and politics ( $n=13$ ). In addition, as the harm reduction measures were multi-agency initiatives, it was imperative that the research captured partner perspectives on drugs policing and changes in police culture and practice. Partners included drug treatment services, local authorities, probation and voluntary sector organisations ( $n=16$ ). Finally, in order to gain a broad national perspective, interviews were carried out with the present and former NPCC lead for drugs and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (APCC) lead for alcohol and substance misuse ( $n=3$ ). Questions asked participants to share their understandings of drug problems and the purpose, challenges and outcomes of drugs policing. They told stories of their experiences and reflected on the ways in which their views, motivations and approach to policing had changed over the course of their careers. They talked about the nature of police work, innovative practices and the changing landscape of policing. In presenting their words below, I have ascribed each participant with an anonymous unique identifier.

The data were analysed thematically using codes derived through a hybrid process of inductive and deductive reasoning (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). This involved using codes that were developed a priori based on concepts and theories from existing research on police culture (e.g. Reiner's 'core characteristics' (Bowling *et al.* 2019), Chan's (1997) reconceptualisation of police culture and Campeau's (2019) work on cultural inertia in police organisations). Further codes were generated and refined through an iterative and reflexive process as the research and analysis progressed. The concept of turning points emerged as significant and this led to the overarching theme of police desistance from criminalisation.



## Findings

### *Change through experiences, stories and turning points*

Owing to a combination of personal values, education and life experience, several officers viewed drug use as primarily a public health matter prior to joining the police and the job had not changed their outlook. Learning about drug policy in Switzerland – where the approach shifted from a criminal justice to a public health model in response to the harms of open drug scenes and heroin injection (Uchtenhagen 2010) – had a significant impact on the following interviewee:

“I’ve always had a view of [drug use] being more of a public health issue rather than an offence per se ... I’m probably now in my views the same as I was when I was 21 ... I guess an event was at university, I read about the Swiss heroin-assisted programme, I think that was quite transformative.” (Police\_Officer#2H)

The vast majority, however, spoke about how their views on drugs had changed over the course of their careers. They reflected on the ways in which police work had shaped their understandings of drug problems and how best to respond to them. For some, change was a ‘natural evolution’ that came about through cumulative experiences of drugs policing and the realisation that ‘if you do what you always do, you will get the same outcomes’. Others identified significant events that had a major impact on their standpoint and approach to policing:

“[O]ne of the key turning points in my career was a sex worker who I was chatting to on duty; she was brilliant, a lovely girl, really friendly and she was telling us quite openly about her addiction, her problems ... [S]he ended up getting murdered ... That, for me, was a real key point in my early career to say, you know, who was looking out for her? Who was helping her with her addiction? Why was she out selling sex to feed her drug habit?” (Police\_Officer#5B)

Officers were largely unconvinced about the deterrent effect of drug law enforcement. The cyclical process of people being arrested, detained and released only to be arrested again soon afterwards – the so-called ‘revolving door’ phenomenon – was compelling evidence that traditional criminal justice responses are ineffective at solving substance use disorders. The counterproductive consequences were evidenced by the harms of criminalisation:

“[F]or the people that we catch with drugs, we need something else because giving them a piece of paper saying that they have been found in possession it’s now on your criminal record isn’t going to deter them anymore.” (Police\_Officer#2H)

“I started going to public conveniences and finding young men cradling a toilet bowl with a needle in the arm, dead. They had just come out of prison having been taking drugs in prison, took the drugs on the street, far, far stronger, killed them straightaway ... I thought this can’t be right.” (Police\_Officer#8D)

“The way we are approaching drugs is criminalising a generation of young people ... who will never work for the police, who will never go on holiday to America ... There will be various things in their lives which professionally they will have difficulty doing, just because they got stopped once with a tiny quantity. It just doesn’t make a great deal of sense.” (Police\_Officer#3H)

During interviews, officers reflected on previous enforcement activities. By reliving past experiences, officers ascribed meaning, illustrated the tensions, dilemmas and complexities involved in drugs policing, and identified how and why they could have acted differently. Several said they had ‘a guilt complex’ about arresting people for possession because of the negative impact it had on their futures. Many felt that not enough is being done to help those who are suffering with drug problems. In the following example, the officer recalls a story of a closure order. The couple that occupied the house were living with addiction and mental health issues. Their neighbours wanted the police to deal with the crime and anti-social behaviour:

“It felt as if I was about to get a medal pinned on my chest for making drug addicts homeless. It was just horrendous ... At the time ... I didn’t get it, I still thought, yeah, it took an officer as good as me to sort this problem out ... I’m not saying it was the wrong thing to do, but we did nothing afterwards to support them, we put

nothing in place to stop their behaviour and then the next time I saw them they were homeless, living in [city] and still committing offences, still taking drugs." (Police\_Officer#7H)

Drugs policing is fraught with competing demands and moral dilemmas that prompt officers to question their decisions or ability to have a positive impact on the situations they encounter. Such dilemmas may also occur when drug laws or organisational constraints inhibit officers from pursuing what they believe to be the right course of action. These experiences, feelings and reflections can result in moral distress (Papazglou *et al.* 2020), as documented in Woods' (2016) account of his career as an undercover cop, psychological crisis and transition to campaigner for drug policy reform.

Interactions with people who use drugs sensitised officers to the causes, consequences and complexities of drug use, increased understanding of users' health and social needs, and engendered scepticism or nuance in attitudes towards criminal justice approaches. Seeing the person in front of them and listening to their stories helped break dehumanising stereotypes – as well as institutional myths (Campeau 2019) – and develop compassion and empathy. It also heightened awareness of stigma and how the public and the police treat people labelled as 'addicts'. In the following narrative, the officer talks about a conversation that changed her mindset and motivated her to co-design a diversion scheme pilot:

"I remember having a conversation with someone at a bus stop and he told me about the way he had been treated by a couple of coppers; he'd committed a theft or something and he probably had tried to run off or whatever, but he was saying that the way that he got treated, the way he got, probably excessive force was used, the way he was spoken to, he said I felt like a piece of shit ... He said but that's how we get treated ... It was talking to him that really made me think we really do need to change our views on how we are dealing with people with addiction. Yes, they are committing crime, they are creating a high demand for us, but by just arresting them and putting them into the criminal justice system, we are not actually getting any further forward. We need to be trying to look at the root cause of the problem." (Police\_Officer#13A)

Drugs were understood to be a 'root cause' of police problems in that drug use is a reason why offenders commit crime. Tackling problematic drug use was thereby framed as a crime reduction strategy. Yet, rather than approaching people with addiction from a blinkered criminal justice perspective, there was widespread recognition of the need to address the 'causes of the causes' (Christmas and Srivastava 2019), the social determinants driving it, such as adverse childhood experiences and structural disadvantages.

Stories of addiction and recovery can encourage police officers to reframe drug problems and their role in helping to resolve them. This officer explains the benefits of collaborating with treatment services and people with lived experience to deliver drug and alcohol awareness and harm reduction training within police organisations:

"[T]hat storytelling is really powerful around that aspect of, you know, drugs, alcohol and mental health and what made them change and actually what would have made them change if they had had that opportunity and how could the police actually create those opportunities more or, you know, just see the problem in a different way." (Police\_Officer#7D)

Such insights were also gained through attending external events at which people share their stories and raise awareness about the realities of addiction and the costs of the drug war. In the following interview excerpt, the officer is recounting an event organised by a charity providing support for family and friends affected by someone else's drug use. She described the event as a turning point that sharpened her focus on harm reduction and the use of health rather than criminal justice outcomes, as well as the need to mitigate the knock-on effects of policing on the secondary victims of criminalisation:

"For the first time, I heard the messages about how people died because their friends couldn't get help to them when they collapsed because they feared being prosecuted for their drug usage ... the fact that families felt very criminalised by the addiction of their son, sibling, brother, boyfriend, partner, girlfriend, and that added to the stress and distress for those individuals." (Police\_Officer#4J)

Within the police service, there are officers and staff who have experience of drug use, either personally or through family and friends. Interviewees explained how exposure to recreational drug use and relationships with people who use drugs shaped their views on drugs, policing and alternatives to criminalisation. This reflects a broader cultural shift apparent in wider society, which, according to the ‘normalisation’ thesis, has become more tolerant and accommodating of drugs (Aldridge *et al.* 2011). An implication of this trend is that new recruits, who joined the police over the past decade or so, have always lived in a society where the use of certain drugs – specifically cannabis, but also ‘party drugs’ such as cocaine and MDMA – is a normalised element of youth culture. These past experiences shape their present thoughts and actions (Pichonnaz 2021):

“[H]aving had experiences around people that have taken drugs and are involved in that kind of scene, it’s quite normal, you know, witnessing stuff like that at uni and then seeing it in the job as well ... I’ve got quite a sort of like liberal way, quite relaxed way and a liberal view on drugs.” (Police\_Officer#6A)

“I’ve got friends now who I socialise with on a regular basis that regularly use cocaine ... Do I, you know, do I not be friends with those people because it rubs against what I do professionally, well the answer to that is no they are my mates and I don’t actually judge them. I just think that it’s such a personal choice ... I don’t really concern myself with it and I don’t actively encourage my staff to go to [street name] on a Saturday night and take pills off people ... [W]hy would we affect someone’s life to such an extent with something so trivial? I don’t understand it.” (Police\_Officer#4A)

Not only did personal experiences shape how individual officers viewed drugs and approached their work, they could also engender a consciously driven personal commitment to challenge and bring about change in police culture and practice. The turning point for one such officer was the drug use of a family member. His emotional investment inspired him to become an expert in the field, ultimately stepping up to force drugs lead, a ‘hook for change’ that influenced his shift in identity (Giordano *et al.* 2002). In this strategic role, he was well positioned and empowered to introduce a diversion scheme for people caught in possession and, in broader terms, sought to educate the organisation about the nature of addiction and harm reduction policing:

“My view was probably a very police view in that drugs, it was a war to deal with drugs, it was a pain in the backside ... That changed ... not through the job but because of personal circumstances where one of my immediate family has become addicted to drugs, to hard drugs, and that effect and the impact of that on, not just her, but the rest of the family and particularly myself ... [It] made me question a lot more around how we police drugs and how we deal with them, which then led to me taking up the post as drugs lead ... because I thought maybe I could do something about it.” (Police\_Officer#5A)

Personal and professional experiences can be intertwined and interconnected. In the following set of comments, the officer draws on his police knowledge of drug-related deaths, including the risk of adulterated and high-purity tablets and powders, to interpret a personal incident, which, in turn, contributed to his evolving, even revised, approach to drugs policing. Needless to say, he was a supporter of drug education and safety testing:

“[My daughter] went off to a festival, her first festival, came back really, really ill ... [W]e kind of questioned her a bit more and it transpired that she had taken her first ecstasy, had a bad reaction and spent the whole festival having emergency medical treatment ... [K]nowing many, many stories of kids taking ecstasy at festivals and being found in their tents, it just made me go cold and really reinforced my kind of view that had been developing anyway that actually we need to do something completely different about drugs and this isn’t about enforcement.” (Police\_Officer#5H)

In police forces where alternatives to criminalisation had been implemented, namely diversion schemes, officers who were initially sceptical usually warmed to the idea after briefings, training and first-hand experience. This was partly because they were familiar with the rationale behind diverting drug users away from the criminal justice system and towards education, treatment and support. It was also noted that many officers have experience of exercising discretion when dealing with (suspected) possession offences in certain contexts and situations. The following officer, for example, suggests that conventional approaches to drug law

enforcement are temporarily suspended when policing music festivals, which can have a lasting impact:

“We don’t deal with simple possession. Now that might not have been written down anywhere, but that’s what you get told in the briefings. So as a mindset you become comfortable with that, that you do have that degree of discretion ... I think that organisationally, that has just made us as individuals within this organisation quite comfortable with adopting a flexible approach around drug use.” (Police\_Officer#8A)

As officers gained experience of diversion, they observed positive impacts, shared stories and discussed competing viewpoints with their colleagues. Cultural knowledge is developed, transformed, reinforced and validated through these processes of experiential learning and socialisation (Chan 1997, Charman 2017). One officer had a story about a woman who cried with gratitude when she was offered diversion instead of custody and prosecution for possession of cocaine. Another said he was ‘never, ever going to nick someone for possession of any drugs’ again because diversion had opened his eyes to better ways and means. Even if officers were not sold in a normative sense, police pragmatism was likely to guarantee buy-in because diversion saved officers time and the organisation money.

### ***Changes in the field***

To more fully understand police culture and new directions in drugs policing, this section focuses on how changes in the field have fostered and facilitated police desistance from criminalisation. It reveals how changes in police organisations and their external environment are shaping police culture and practice. It also builds on the previous section by considering how officers work within the structural conditions of policing to forge new trajectories.

In England and Wales, the twin challenges of changing requirements and financial austerity, which resulted in budgets cuts and a dramatic fall in the number of police officers, have forced the police to ‘re-imagine’ policing (Thornton 2015). Caveney *et al.* (2020) argue for a transformed understanding of police culture owing to organisational and environmental changes across the policing landscape. The ‘era of evidence’ (Knutsson and Tompson 2017, p. 1) has created a context in which police are more receptive to research and the pursuit of ‘what works’ (Hunter *et al.* 2019). This is evident in the following quotation from a senior officer about how research informed the decision to introduce a drug diversion pilot:

“I think policing is getting more focused on those activities that are most effective and I think because of that it creates a context where we are asking questions about some other stuff we do and have always done and thinking well, why have we always done this? So we are asking the question, even though it’s against the law to be in possession of drugs, why at [police force] are we arresting 3,700 people and what value is that adding?” (Police\_Officer#3H)

Interviewees stated that ‘the evidence’ – in various forms, not limited to randomised controlled trials – is very much part of the process for change and innovation in police organisations, alongside experience, politics and resources. Through interviews and document analysis, insight was gained into how the police used research and knowledge exchange activities to improve understanding of specific drug problems, develop business cases and conduct evaluations (see Durham’s *Checkpoint* (Weir *et al.* 2019), Thames Valley’s *Drug Diversion Scheme Pilot* (Spyt *et al.* 2019) and the *West Midlands Drug Policy Recommendations* (Jamieson 2018)). Whilst the practice of using research was acknowledged to be ‘a bit slapdash’ at times, interviewees were unanimous in their views that research evidence is a powerful instrument of persuasion and reform.

Another structural change that has facilitated new directions in drugs policing – which relates to Herbert’s (1998) normative order of bureaucratic control – is the decline of the ‘target culture’ (de Maillard and Savage 2018). During the New Labour administrations, an era of highly centralised performance management, officers said police resources were often focused on drugs in order to meet targets and increase the overall sanction detection rate. People who use drugs were thereby

stopped, searched and arrested for output measures that do not address the value or impact of policing. While the pressure of performance regimes remains, the need for enhanced priority setting and proactivity, coupled with a renewed strategic emphasis on demand management through multi-agency partnerships and problem-oriented interventions, had given the police more freedom to think outside the box instead of being preoccupied with ticking it:

"We've started to see a change from that culture of detection chasing into actually let's think about this in a very different way around crime reduction and long term problem solving." (Police\_Officer#13A)

"We have evolved over the years and gone from purely punitive arrest and remand to prison to a much more rounded partnership approach where we look at opportunities for harm reduction, consumption reduction, education and diversion." (Police\_Officer#1G)

Multi-agency working, especially partnerships involving drug treatment services or in relation to integrated offender management, was credited with improving police officer knowledge about drug problems, holistic responses and pathways to recovery and resistance. The rise of vulnerability in contemporary criminal justice policies is another factor in explaining changes in police perspectives and practices (Asquith *et al.* 2017, NPCC 2018). Strategic agendas, training packages and line management meant that interviewees were formally acquainted with how to identify, protect and support vulnerable individuals. Officers spoke about the underlying personal and situational factors driving addiction and identified drug users as potentially vulnerable because drug use enhances the risk of harm. The importance of safeguarding was given emphasis by record levels of drug-related deaths, which has been recognised as a public health crisis for the UK (Health and Social Care Committee 2019, Black 2020). Officers also said the ubiquity of 'county lines' had raised awareness of exploitation in drug markets, most notably in relation to the coercion of young people and the home takeover practice known as 'cuckooing' (Spicer 2021). Viewing people who use drugs through the lens of vulnerability blurs the distinction between victim and offender and can change how drug problems are framed and responded to. At the same time, however, disrupting binary criminal justice categories and established methods of policing was found to create tensions and confusing demands:

"[A]fter we've nicked a burglar for the sixth time that month and he has been burgling someone's house and you've had to deal with the victim and you have to listen to them cry and then you've gone and laid hands on the person that's done it, do you really want to concern yourself with thinking about the fact he was abused as a child and addiction is because of that, or do you just think I'm really sorry but he's a burglar, he needs to go to prison?" (Police\_Officer#4A)

"We are criminalising somebody because they have got an addiction problem but the addiction is in part due to the fact they were raped when they were 13 years old and the only way of blocking out those memories is to succumb to Class A drugs but in order to fund their Class A drug addiction they have got to go out and commit crime ... So we are criminalising people who are victims of crime." (Police\_Officer#5D)

Changes to the institutional architecture of police governance in England and Wales have played a significant part in reshaping the drugs policing landscape in some localities. Since their introduction in 2012, directly elected PCCs have been tasked with establishing the strategic priorities for local policing, securing an effective and efficient police force, bringing together a range of partner agencies and funding services to improve community safety. Although central influences continue to shape local policing (Jones and Lister 2019), this new structure of devolved governance has created opportunities for policy transfer and bottom-up reform (Bainbridge 2020). A number of PCCs have become 'drug policy actors' (Austen 2015), or enablers of harm reduction approaches to drugs, most notably in Durham (Hogg 2017), North Wales (Jones 2020) and the West Midlands (Jamieson 2018). Interviewees spoke about how PCCs could pioneer or facilitate innovation and reform in drugs policing because they 'operate in the political realm' and provide 'top cover' to the police. Other factors included the ability of PCCs to lead local partnerships and change discourses on drugs:

"PCCs are in a position of being elected to the post and having a public mandate, having the ability to speak out. Some will be over cautious, afraid of upsetting the horses, but others will get on and say what's right." (PCC#1J)

"The PCC as a convenor role is essential because you have the power to pull the right people around the table, from across health and policing and local authorities etc." (PCC#5J)

"The PCC's views, and the drugs summit where we listened a lot to public health, have actually reframed some of the ambition, which has got people talking." (Police\_Officer#4J)

In the UK, a fundamental aspect of the field that remains unchanged is the legislative framework for drug control. Law reform is the gift of the government but the Conservatives have made it clear that they have 'no intention of decriminalising drugs' (HM Government 2017a, p16). Yet, whilst alternatives to criminalisation are not formally endorsed in national policy, the current drug strategy does provide room for manoeuvre by stating that 'the criminal justice system should consider use of health-based, rehabilitative interventions to address the drivers behind the crime and help prevent further substance misuse and offending' (p23). The NPCC (2017) strategy for charging and out of court disposals has created more room by stressing the value of early intervention and diversion over prosecution and promoting a whole system approach to addressing vulnerability. In particular, within the framework for out of court disposals, 'community resolutions' have allowed for new approaches to be trialled in relation to drug possession and some other low-level offences that do not create a criminal record (Spyt *et al.* 2019). The introduction of 'Outcome 22' has provided another disposal option that leads to no further action (NPCC 2019). Police have been utilising these tools – along with the discretionary authority of police forces and PCCs to ascribe priorities to national policies, determine their uptake and drive their own strategic direction – to 'test the political lines' and 'push the boundaries' of drugs policing:

"I think it's a test of what we can do within the current legal framework because obviously if we did decriminalise, we wouldn't be talking about any of this ... [I]t is using the evidence which is available and been tested and evaluated and debated over and over about enforcement and how it's not working ... [W]hat can we do to reduce drug-related deaths? And it's that, you know ... and we need to do something quite quickly as well, so we do need to push the boundaries about how far we can go to emulate a model that works, Portugal, within our framework." (Police\_Officer#1H)

The above officer was the driving force behind drug diversion in his service area and identified as an advocate for harm reduction and drug policy reform. Having spent the early years of his policing career rigorously enforcing drug laws, inquiring into a drugs death and resonating with the victim's family made him question the purpose of arresting people for possession and ask what more the police can do to help save lives. Empowered by members of the senior management team, he went on a journey to gain knowledge, which involved a great deal of research and networking with key stakeholders across the country and overseas. During interview, he cited HM Government's (2017b) evaluation of the *Drug Strategy 2010*, which concluded that drug law enforcement has little measurable impact on prevalence of use or other metrics of performance. This evaluation also conceded that there are negative outcomes of enforcement activity, such as increased levels of drug market violence, health risks from varying purity of drugs, and harms caused by the imposition of criminal sanctions. On the topic of reform, he spoke about the positive impact of decriminalisation in Portugal and the value of learning from drug policies around the world (see e.g. Home Office 2014). As a 'policy entrepreneur' (Kingdon 1984, Cairney 2018), he was able to fuse his experience and passion with the evidence-base and use it to stimulate debate, feed into police decision-making processes and mobilise support for change.

This officer was not a maverick. Throughout the research process, I came across more agents of change, listened to their stories and what their colleagues had to say about them. Armed with cop credibility, compelling evidence and a genuine belief in what they were doing, these individuals challenged institutional myths about drug users, policing drugs and options for reform, shared reflective narratives that helped others make sense of drug problems and promoted attachment to new perspectives.

## Cultural conflict and continuity

Police organisations 'are complex sites of contestation and shared premises, change as well as stasis (Campeau 2019, p. 80). Cultural conflict is readily apparent in the following interview excerpts, which describe the reactions of a police force's senior management team and front-line officers to the same drug diversion scheme:

"There are some people, senior people in this organisation who think this is an utterly dreadful idea and do not understand why we would want to stop arresting people for possession of drugs. It tends to be people towards the end of their service but they just – and I've been quite surprised by this – but they just don't get it." (Police\_Officer#3H)

"Two officers came down into custody shortly after that briefing ... and one said: 'I think it's brilliant, I really hope it works, I have never really seen it like this before and I think it is a really good idea'. The next one that comes in: 'Well why don't we just decriminalise everything then and not have a police force?' I thought, okay, two people, same briefing, same team, couldn't have more different views." (Police\_Officer#4H)

Fundamentally, the mindset spilt regarding drugs policing and alternatives to criminalisation is part of debates about the nature and boundaries of the police mission (Bowling *et al.* 2019, Loader 2020). Notwithstanding the intersections, in-betweens and shades of grey, the crux of the matter is the longstanding but oversimplified question of whether the police are best defined as a law enforcement agency tasked with fighting crime or a social service doing whatever is necessary to improve public safety and wellbeing. The next comments capture old-school cultural scripts (Campeau 2019) adopted by enforcement-oriented officers and why they act as barriers to harm reduction policing:

"We have the law to uphold and until the government change policy, then the message that comes out of the Home Office is the Misuse of Drugs Act tells you what is lawful, what is not lawful and your obligation is to police everything that's unlawful. Until the Chief tells us something different, that's what we do." (Police\_Officer#1G)

"[I]t doesn't matter what the evidence says because that evidence doesn't matter to them because we are not in the business of harm reduction, leave that to social workers. We are in the business of enforcement. So if the evidence says that it makes it worse, it doesn't matter; the government, the law has decided you are a criminal, not for us to second guess what the law says." (Police\_Officer#6H)

As Herbert (1998) points out, the law is a core value for police officers and inevitably guides action. It legitimises both their institution and behaviour, providing a sense of purpose in that they are preserving a legally defined social order. The notion that the police are obliged to police every unlawful act, however, or do so through enforcement actions, is a myth that has long since been debunked. What can also be seen in the above comment is the view that enforcement is 'real police work' whereas harm reduction and associated multi-agency initiatives are 'soft' policing (McCarthy 2014).

Cultural conflict about alternatives to criminalisation can thus be interpreted as a normative clash. Those officers who adopted new-generation scripts (Campeau 2019) chose to frame the issue with the normative orders of morality and competence, instead of the law (Herbert 1998). Supporters of harm reduction approaches regularly said they were 'the right thing to do'. For them, 'success' in policing people who use drugs was not measured in arrests. Providing assistance through education, treatment and support was both ethically justifiable and pragmatic in terms of effectively reducing harm and saving the police time and money.

In addition to tensions between the normative orders of law, morality and competence, it was found that cultural conflict existed because there were different definitions of competent drugs policing. Officers who favoured arresting people for possession explained that enforcement deters people from using drugs and that the prevalence of drug use would be higher in the absence of enforced prohibition. Another widely held view was that enforcement incapacitates drug users and thereby temporarily prevents them from causing harm to others through crime and disorder.

Indeed, it is important to note that supporters of alternatives to criminalisation recognised that there are situations in which arrest, even incarceration, are necessary interventions:

“Class A drug users aren’t often particularly responsible in the way that they behave in terms of ... using drugs, clearing up after themselves, leaving drug litter and stuff around, coming and going from their property at all hours of the day and night, noise, other people coming and going, letting their property be used for drug use or drug dealing, so it can be really massively harmful for local people.” (Police\_Officer#6A)

For the most part, ‘addicts’ were assigned the ‘criminal’ label owing to the strong association between the use of addictive drugs like heroin and crack cocaine and involvement in acquisitive crime. Most officers derived this drug-crime connection from their experiences of arresting drug users for crimes committed to fund their drug purchases. A ‘catch and convict mentality’ is perhaps a corollary of ‘criminal’ being the overriding master status. Several police partners identified this old-school script as a significant barrier to alternatives to criminalisation:

“It’s the old-fashioned policing culture. We are here to arrest the baddies and lock them away. We are not here to rehabilitate and to stop them from reoffending, that’s not our job. That’s their mentality. It’s an ignorant one, it’s a very backwards one but that is a policing culture that some people, especially the older officers still have.” (Partner\_Agency#3E)

Enforcement was legitimised because it acts as a gateway to treatment interventions and rehabilitation. When adopting this script, arrest was framed as ‘an opportunity for addicts’ in that police custody and prison provides them with a break from the streets and access to drug, triage and support workers. Officers told stories about drug users who had turned their life around after a ‘stint inside’. That said, this rationale came with a healthy dose of scepticism and the outcome was known to be a double-edged sword:

“Ultimately if somebody ends up in prison and they have addiction issues, then they can access help. It’s almost on the doorstep, you haven’t got to go through a referral process ... But is that good? ... Somebody has ended up in prison, you know, they have now got a criminal career, they are now in jail, they will always be an ex-prisoner for the rest of their lives.” (Police\_Officer#14A)

A final take on competent drugs policing framed the benefits of enforcement in instrumental terms. Interviewees who adopted this script said arresting drug users was an operational necessity in the fight against organised crime because it yields intelligence about drug dealers and evidence that can be used to make cases against them:

“If you use that on a plate stuff, then you can get access to a whole load of other criminality. The only difficulty is along the way you will pick up a load of flotsam and jetsam, if you can call it that, as in low-level criminality or criminals, when you are trying to get the Mr Bigs, but that’s just part and parcel of it.” (Police\_Officer#2K)

Changes in police culture and practice were affirmed by partner agencies. Reflecting on over fifteen years working in drug services, one interviewee said that the police officers he collaborated with had changed their approach to people who use drugs over recent years:

“[T]hey don’t want to arrest them, they don’t want to punish them, they don’t want to treat them as criminals, they want to get them into treatment and support them.” (Partner\_Agency#1A)

However, partners stressed that the extent of this cultural change should not be overstated. It was said to be ‘a few anomalies’ rather than a wholesale shift. Partners also drew attention to disparities between the standpoint of individual officers, the official position of police organisations, and how policing plays out on the streets. As one drug treatment service manager put it, police officers say policing drug users is ‘not their priority’, their local force is ‘progressive’ in that it has a diversion scheme in place, but police operations still ‘just arrest a whole load of people who are visibly out there and using’. Discrepancies such as these exemplify the complexities of drugs policing and indicate that a multitude of cultural, organisational and situational factors are involved in police decision-making processes.



## Conclusion

The enforcement approach still dominates drugs policing in England and Wales and people who use drugs continue to be criminalised as a matter of routine and on a regular basis (Shiner *et al.* 2018, Coomber *et al.* 2019). What this article has shown, however, is that, even within apparent stasis, change is happening as police officers challenge the status quo and transform cultural knowledge and institutionalised practice.

Recent years have seen the emergence of new directions in drugs policing as police forces experiment with schemes that divert drug users away from criminal justice processes. Police support for harm reduction measures is growing as well, such as naloxone provision, heroin-assisted treatment, drug consumption rooms and drug safety testing (Hogg 2017, Jamieson 2018, Jones 2020). These developments might be viewed as part of broader trends in policing that have resulted in a more expansive and proactive conception of police work. In particular, increasing emphasis on the intersections between policing and public health has seen the promotion of partnerships to safeguard vulnerable groups and undertake preventative activities that get to the root of social problems (van Dijk and Croft 2017, van Dijk *et al.* 2019). Reform in drugs policing also feeds into debates about reframing drug policy (Health and Social Care Committee 2019).

Looking at police desistance from criminalisation through a cultural lens, my research has explored the extent to which these changes in police practice reflect changes in police culture. Like Chan (1997), Herbert (1998) and Campeau (2015, 2019), whose theoretical tools have helped shape the preceding analysis, I argue that scholars should forego crude generalisations and take a nuanced approach to the study of police culture, which teases out cultural variations and gives emphasis to human agency in the interactive relationship between culture, practice and the structural conditions of policing. I also argue that further insights into cultural change can be gained by drawing on the concept of turning points from life-course criminology and desistance research (Sampson and Laub 1993, Schinkel 2019).

At the coalface of policing, where law and policy touches the people and problems it is intended to address, police officers are routinely exposed to drug use, drug markets and drug-related crime. They are aware of the harms that drugs can cause to individuals, families and communities. They recognise that drugs policing is a complex endeavour of competing demands and mixed outcomes. This article captures the transformative impact of certain experiences and stories and the importance of turning points for understanding why police officers change their views on drugs and redefine their approach to policing. A common thread found in many of the interviews was the realisation that enforcement has little positive impact on drug use and criminalisation can be harmful to drug users. Another theme was social interactions with people who use drugs that broke stereotypes and gave rise to greater compassion and empathy. The findings also reveal how changes in the field are shaping police culture and practice. Changes to police organisations and the external environment that emerged as particularly impactful were police budget cuts, trends in evidence-based policing, the wider vulnerability agenda and the introduction of PCCs.

My research indicates that police culture is diverse and dynamic. It is constantly evolving as officers adapt to new experiences, pressures and problems, the changeable nature of the occupation, and the wider social, political and economic context. As a result, the 'cognitive lenses' (Skolnick 1966) through which police view the world are multifocal and subject to prescription. Police culture is changing as officers put alternative cultural resources to work, tell (and listen to) alternative stories and use alternative schemas, frames and scripts to make sense of drug problems, their role and (in)effectiveness. During interviews, officers talked about drug users as people rather than 'police property' (Lee 1981), recognised their vulnerabilities and blurred the distinction between victim and offender. Policing people who use drugs was framed in terms of harm reduction and support rather than enforcement and punitive interventions. Associated narratives called current strategies into question and legitimated alternatives to criminalisation. At the same time, however, there were manifest continuities with conventional cultural repertoires and patterns of

drugs policing. Cultural conflict and resistance to change emanated from the tension between competing conceptions of the police mission. Following Herbert (1998), the normative orders that structure the social world of policing can explain cultural variation within and between police organisations, especially the sets of rules and practices oriented around law, morality and competence. The coexistence of old and new cultural schemas and scripts in the police reservoir of knowledge is another explanation (Campeau 2019).

A policy implication of my research is that cultural change could be furthered through experiential learning and critical reflective practice approaches to police education (Christopher 2015). This should include critical reflection on the complexities of drugs policing, moral dilemmas and perspectives on successful outcomes, as well as deliberative engagement with people with lived experience of drug problems and the criminal justice system. Such an approach to education should help tackle stigma and weed out lingering institutional myths and misconceptions. Working on the assumption that police managers are supportive of research-informed decision making, changes in culture and practice should continue to occur as more officers and organisations engage with evidence of what works in drugs policing. Research suggests that '[t]he most direct way in which the police can reduce harm is to stop imposing criminal records and other punishments which harm people' (Stevens 2013, p6). International reviews show that diversion can improve health and wellbeing, as well as reduce offending and criminal justice costs, without increasing drug use (Eastwood *et al.* 2016, Neyroud 2018, Stevens *et al.* 2019). Promising evidence is emerging from evaluations of diversion schemes operating in England (Spyt *et al.* 2019, Weir *et al.* 2019). More research is needed to develop the evidence base, stimulate new ideas and bolster the case for reform. Future research could also delve deeper into the factors that foster or impede innovation in police organisations.

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