

Vulnerability and Policing: Rethinking the Role and Limits of the Police

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Abstract

Police are increasingly called upon to manage a host of social ills and vulnerable people, often filling gaps left by the withdrawal of other public and third sector services. Yet, there remains a distinct lack of critical assessment of what problems the police are expected to solve and whether they are the most appropriate agency to do so. This article highlights the need to rethink policing through multi-lateral networks that explicitly locate police within broader tasks of public safety and the protection of vulnerable citizens. It argues for a whole-system response that harnesses the roles of diverse public, private and voluntary organisations and clarifies the parameters of police within that system. It explores the opportunities and challenges that attend to delimiting the police role through recent developments and debates concerning responses to mental health-related problems and the 'Right Care, Right Person' agreement. It concludes with some thoughts on how we might recast, through the lens of vulnerability, a decentred role for police within a wider system of public safety.

Keywords: police, policing, public safety networks, vulnerability, whole-system approaches

Introduction

BRITISH POLICING APPEARS CAUGHT in something of a 'permacrisis'—understood as 'a long period of great difficulty, confusion or suffering that seems to have no end'.¹ The debates sparked by the killing of George Floyd in the US and the global Black Lives Matter social movement that it re-invigorated, as well as the series of scandals disclosing institutional racism, sexism, homophobia and corruption within the British police, have resulted in a serious erosion in trust and public confidence.²

While the recurrent failure of public services to respond adequately in joined-up ways in the face of serious harm to vulnerable groups and individuals—from child sexual exploitation and abuse to modern slavery—are by no means new, they prompt calls for change that have become louder, deeper and more vociferous over recent years. These 'crises' are manifestations of deep-seated tensions around long-standing organisational, cultural, ideological and structural fault-lines. The problem is not only that politicians too frequently turn to the police to solve social problems, but also, as Egon Bittner observed, 'no human problem exists, or is imaginable, about which it could be said with finality that this certainly could not become the proper business of the police'.³ Accepting the 'inevitable fallibility of policing' generally, given its inherent complexity and the likelihood of error, it is my contention that this fallibility is exacerbated and overlaid by deeply embedded flaws in the way in which the role and limits of the police are conceived and deployed in public policy

¹Cambridge Dictionary, 'Permacrisis', 2024; <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/permacrisis>.

²L. Casey, *An Independent Review into the Standards of Behaviour and Internal Culture of the Metropolitan Police Service*, London, Metropolitan Police Service, March 2023; <https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/met/about-us/baroness-casey-review/update-march-2023/baroness-casey-review-march-2023a.pdf>; N. O'Loan, *The Report of the Daniel Morgan Independent Panel*, House of Commons HC11-I, London, HMSO, 2021; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60c89983d3bf7f4bd4662c62/_HC_11-I_-_The_Report_of_the_Daniel_Morgan_Independent_Panel_Volume_1_.pdf.

³E. Bittner, *Aspects of Police Work*, Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1990, p. 250.

and political discourse.⁴ In essence, political expectations of what the police should do differ radically from what they actually do, as well as what they can legitimately be expected to do. All this obscures what the police could do to enrich the quality of public safety and support for vulnerable people, while remaining alert to the inevitable dangers of police authority that can result in excessive force and over-policing. Hence, we miss the limited and bounded role that police might play and can perform in wider problem-solving endeavours.

To address this flaw requires an epistemic and paradigmatic decentring of the role of the police within policing and public safety. As a growing number of commentators have progressively come to acknowledge—eloquently reflected in the Police Foundation's *Strategic Review of Policing* and echoed recently by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary—there is a pressing need to reassess the social role of the police in contemporary society.⁵ This necessitates re-evaluation of not only *what the police are for* but crucially also *the limits of the police in a modern democratic society*. While some consideration is given to the former, much less attention has been paid to the latter. This article addresses these interconnected issues and contributes to rethinking public safety in and through multilateral policing networks in a way that explicitly locates the police within, but also decentres the police from, the broader tasks of public safety and the protection of vulnerable citizens. In essence, we need to both design a whole-system response to public safety that incorporates and harnesses the roles of diverse public, private and third sector organisations, and to clarify the parameters of the police within that complex system.

⁴T. Newburn, 'The inevitable fallibility of policing', *Policing and Society*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2022, pp. 434–450.

⁵Police Foundation, *Strategic Review of Policing*, London, Police Foundation, 2022; https://policingreview.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/srpew_final_report.pdf; HMICFRS, *State of Policing: The Annual Assessment of Policing in England and Wales 2022*, London, HMSO, 2023; <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publication-html/state-of-policing-the-annual-assessment-of-policing-in-england-and-wales-2022/>.

The article commences by reviewing the role and work of the police within a wider frame of public safety, before going on to assess recent developments and debates concerning police involvement in responding to mental health-related problems. It concludes with some thoughts on how we might recast, through the lens of vulnerability, a decentred role for the police within a pluralised public safety system.

Rethinking the police role

Recent decades have seen an increasing range of social problems become cast as 'police problems'. Driven by social, cultural, environmental and technological change, new and emergent—as well as historic—harms and social problems have been added to the long list of police tasks. In addition to 'traditional' crimes and 'new' types of crime—for instance modern slavery, cyber-enabled harm and forms of exploitation—police work entails large volumes of non-crime incidents. It is estimated that over 80 per cent of all command-and-control calls for service are non-crime related.⁶ These range from mental health issues, neighbourhood nuisances, anti-social behaviour, public protection, safeguarding, missing persons, diverse types of vulnerability, public safety and welfare activity. Police may be required to do the work of thief-catchers, social workers, mental health specialists and nurses, depending on the occasion. Yet, the police have a limited set of tools, powers, competencies and capabilities with which to approach any given social problem. Moreover, where they do exist, these resources tend to be coercive and punitively oriented towards containing immediate situations and urgent incidents or imposing moral order. After all, the unique police contribution to any situation is largely the availability of force. In Bittner's terms, the police serve as 'a mechanism for the distribution of nonnegotiable coercive force employed in accordance with the dictates of an intuitive grasp of situational exigencies ... this and this alone is what the existence of the police uniquely provides'.⁷

⁶College of Policing, *Estimating demand on the police service*, College of Policing, 2015, p. 9; <https://assets.production.copweb.aws.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2021-03/demand-on-policing-report.pdf>.

⁷Bittner, *Aspects of Police Work*, p. 131.

Bittner was undoubtedly correct in attributing the defining characteristic of the police to their ability to use force in efforts to de-escalate conflict and tensions, restore order and enforce the law. Nonetheless, this tends to be interpreted as meaning that first, police inevitably wield coercive force; and second, police are the only public authority or service that can and do assert coercive force legitimately. On the first front, Bittner himself was at pains to emphasise the ‘under-enforcement’ of the law as a key characteristic of police practice and the limited recourse to force. As Banton long ago argued, the patrolling police officer ‘is primarily a “peace officer” rather than a “law officer”’.⁸ Nonetheless, given the uneven spatial and social distribution of policing, social ills and disadvantage, some groups experience over-policing, others under-policing, or at least under-protection from the state and still others are simultaneously under-and over-policed. As such, the police stand simultaneously as a guarantor of, and threat to, citizens’ security. Police can serve both to mitigate and exacerbate existing vulnerabilities.

Ultimately, the core role of the police is to prevent crime, resolve conflict and maintain order. Yet, while the police are called upon to manage social order, they do not and cannot create it in the first place. Order is fostered and sustained by much wider processes, institutions, social norms and values. Much police work stems from the fact that the police are available and capable of rapid response and that other services—increasingly strapped for resources, especially so since 2010—are unable to respond. Given that police activity is largely reactive, policing risks being drawn into a vicious cycle of simply responding haphazardly to increasing demand, while failing to address unmet need. What is largely neglected is (pro-)actively shaping problem-based responses through structured partnership interactions with other services, particularly in ways that acknowledge the interdependencies between organisations, as well as the causes of the problem itself. Furthermore, police involvement with an array of social ills can mean that harm-related problems come to be perceived and defined as crime problems, in part on the simple basis that the police deal with them.

⁸M. Banton, *The Policeman in the Community*, London, Tavistock, 1964, p. 127.

For successive British governments, police have come to constitute a default public service of last resort for all manner of problems. As public funding has been stripped from civil society, third and public sector agencies providing care, the police have increasingly been pulled into managing the fallout and spill-over effects. When other services ‘fail’ or ‘close’, policing is invariably left to pick up the pieces, directly or indirectly. Police are a residual service charged with dealing with crises that other institutions cannot or fail to manage adequately themselves—either alone or collectively—and are not readily or easily re-assigned to anybody else. They are called upon when social, welfare, health, preventive and protective services go awry. As such, the police are often the only public agency available in a crisis. Fundamentally, however, there has been a distinct lack of critical assessment of what problems the state is asking the police to solve and whether the police are really best suited to solve them. As a result, the police have been drawn into dealing with a host of social ills that other institutions of civil society or public services might better deal with. As the Home Affairs Committee in its 2018 report *Policing for the Future*, noted: ‘In too many areas, the police are the only emergency service for those in crisis ... the police service is playing an increasing role in managing vulnerability and risk across public services’.⁹ Yet, where police are involved in managing vulnerability and providing social support, there are always inevitable risks of criminalisation or violence if a situation escalates.

Calls to ‘end policing’ and ‘defund the police’ have been important in highlighting the pernicious and incremental creep of police authority in diverse walks of social life—often by default as much as design.¹⁰ However, they present a rather unidimensional framing of the

⁹Home Affairs Committee *Policing for the Future: Tenth Report of Session 2017–19*, HC 515, London, House of Commons, 2018, at paras. 143, 168; <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmha/515/515.pdf>.

¹⁰A. S. Vitale, *The End of Policing*, London, Verso, 2017; A. S. Vitale, ‘The answer to police violence is not “reform”. It’s defunding. Here’s why’, *The Guardian*, 31 May 2020; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/31/the-answer-to-police-violence-is-not-reform-its-defunding-heres-why>.

issues at stake. They contrast welfare and policing—care and control—as if they were conceptually and organisationally discrete, rather than permeable, intertwined and interdependent. Social commentators, such as Jacques Donzelot and Nikolas Rose, have long shown that so-called ‘care institutions’ have been proactively involved in shaping disciplinary and policing endeavours.¹¹ In many ways, the police and criminal justice system play relatively minor roles in the wider history and constitution of control practices; where both ‘circuits of inclusion’ and ‘circuits of exclusion’ cut across institutions of both ‘care’ and ‘control’ (welfare and policing). The enmeshing of these has become more starkly obvious in light of policy initiatives in recent decades that directly enlist the regulatory capacities of welfare and policing in the name of community safety, antisocial behaviour, ‘troubled families’, and so on. Calls to defund the police as an institution will not ‘end policing’ as a social phenomenon.¹² Populations are governed not by interactions with discrete agencies, but rather, in and through assemblages of complex and hybrid processes, mentalities and organisations. Moreover, to conceive of the police as the sole authorisers of coercive powers over citizens is to belittle the significant discretionary powers of exclusion, denial, expulsion and restrictions on freedom possessed and routinely exercised by social workers, doctors, housing providers and educators, to name but a few.

‘Defund the police’ advocates tend to fall into the same mythical trap as many politicians of holding the police up as autonomous crime fighter, albeit in a more critical light. There is a tendency here to segment the world into discrete spheres that map onto professional service lines in rather crude functionalist and reductionist ways, such that police—and by implication policing—are always and only about law enforcement and order maintenance. By contrast, schools are only concerned with education, social workers only concerned with caring and so forth. While the coercive power of the police differentiates

them from most other state agencies and their roles consistently operate in the shadows of that coercive power, it is wrong to assume that it is always deployed in such ways. What unites most of the incidents to which the police are routinely summoned is that they *might* benefit from the presence of an officer with legal authority legitimately to impose a solution as a recourse of last resort.

Policing and the police

Two initial conceptual problems muddy the waters when thinking critically about the role of the police in modern society. The first is the all too evident tendency to conflate *policing*—as a process and public good—with the *police*—as a state agency. This immediately places the police centre stage as the sole institution for providing policing and public security, rather than conceiving of policing as a plural enterprise to which a diversity of actors contribute and for which the public good requires harnessing the distributed knowledge, plural expertise and dispersed capacities, assets and resources that contribute to public safety. Thus, for example, when it comes to problems of online safety and risk, the centrality of the police not only obscures the pivotal role that private online service providers and social media platforms play in policing internet harm, but also conceals the inadequacies of a territorially-bounded agency—the police—in the seeking to regulate the trans-territoriality of cyberspace.

Policing, broadly conceived, constitutes much more than what the police do: ‘first, it entails intentional action or a purposeful condition; second, it involves the conscious exercise of power or authority by an individual or organisation; third, it is directed towards rule or norm enforcement, the promotion of order or assurances of safety; and, fourth, it seeks to govern in the present and/or the future’.¹³ The value of this definition lies in that it:

- does not specifically mention the police or particular criminal justice agencies, but instead, encompasses what they do;

¹¹J. Donzelot, *The Policing of Families*, New York, Pantheon, 1979; N. Rose, ‘Government and control’, *British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2000, pp. 321–339.

¹²Vitale, *The End of Policing*.

¹³A. Crawford, ‘Plural policing in the UK: policing beyond the police’, in T. Newburn, ed., *Handbook of Policing*, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 147–181, at p. 148.

- does not tie policing to a specific geographical territory—think of policing cyberspace and transnational policing;
- extends beyond individuals to organisations and, by implication, encompasses policing performed by technology as well as human agency—embedded forms of policing built into the routines and architecture of infrastructures or machines—for example, algorithmic policing;
- refers to power as well as authority as a basis for policing;
- identifies policing as being an intentional and conscious exercise of power or authority directed to the achievement of particular ends; and,
- is not simply concerned with practices that shape the present but projects into the future.

This conceptual starting point encourages us to start with the nature of the policing problem and the harms to be prevented in the service of public safety, rather than with the organisation that has been constructed and refashioned over time through the narrow lens of ‘statecraft’. The police need to be seen as just one part of a broader societal response to crime and harm. In many senses, policing and public safety is too important to be left to the police alone.

Contemporary policing, by necessity, is embedded in and dependent on a complex constellation of inter-agency and cross-sectoral partnerships. There has been a growing recognition that the police cannot act alone in policy discourse over the past thirty years, to the point that the language of ‘partnerships’ now pervade contemporary policy debates about policing and crime prevention.¹⁴ Nonetheless, we remain trapped in much the same reality. We acknowledge plurality and interdependencies only to act *as if* they did not exist. Rather, in the face of plurality and complexity,

contemporary practices seek to reassert the dominant and central place of the police within policing and public safety in ways that resuscitate the ‘myth’ of the monopolistic sovereign state. All too often, the common response ‘is a defensive and reactionary one: “How can we re-impose state police control over policing?”’.¹⁵ It is as if state monopoly over policing is revealed as misleading and inappropriate, but simultaneously reinvented before we ever get around to thinking through the transformational implications of plural policing networks or ‘policing beyond the police’. We fail to shake off the blinkers that accompany a police-centric perspective on harm. Rather like Maslow’s hammer, the police are similarly the subject of the ‘law of instrument’; if the only tool you have recourse to is a hammer—in this case the police—you tend to see every problem as a nail, in other words, a police and crime problem.¹⁶

This is accompanied by a second and related fallacy, namely the conflation of the police with crime control. By reducing crime control to the purview of police alone, we are blinded to the evident fact that the levers that might effect contemporary harms and crimes lie far from the reach of the police. Much of what the police do is determined by external forces beyond their control. The police are only one—relatively small—element in the regulation of behaviour, often dwarfed by the extensiveness of other forms of control within organisations, families and communities. As sociologists of policing have long argued, the most important processes producing order and conformity are to be found in informal, everyday and mundane social processes and relations, located within institutions of civil society. Some time ago, David Bayley forcefully argued:

The police do not prevent crime. This is one of the best kept secrets of modern life. Experts know it, the police know it, but the public does not know it. Yet the police pretend that they are society’s best defense against crime and continually argue that if they are given more resources, especially personnel, they will be

¹⁴Thirty years ago, interdepartmental Circular 8/84 acknowledged that: ‘Since some factors affecting crime lie outside the control or direct influence of the police, crime prevention cannot be left to them alone’. Instead, it advocated a partnership approach to crime prevention, whereby ‘preventing crime is a task for the whole community’; <https://depositedpapers.parliament.uk/depositedpaper/2201265/details>.

¹⁵L. Johnston and C. Shearing, *Governing Security*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 11.

¹⁶A. H. Maslow, *The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance*, New York, Harper & Row, 1966.

able to protect communities against crime. This is a myth ... Governments should either resolve the doubts about the usefulness of the police or face up to the conclusion that preventing crime requires a great deal more than pouring money into law enforcement.¹⁷

This is a myth that the police actively collude in sustaining, in large part because it is in their short-term political and organisational interests to justify public resources, especially in times of fiscal public sector restraint. However, the mythical image it fosters—of the police as autonomous, insulated and solitary guardians against crime—fundamentally hampers the real tasks of crime prevention and control, as it ignores all those preventive forces that might effect change. Moreover, by equating police work with crime, we fail to acknowledge that much of what the police actually do is not about crime, but an array of responses to social problems of various kinds. We know that the vast majority of calls by the public to police are not crime related. In fact, it is estimated that over 80 per cent of calls to police do not result in a crime being recorded. The problem with the prevailing view of the police as crime fighters—extolled by politicians of various persuasions—is that it undeniably does not reflect the empirical reality of police work, or the nature of public demands on the police. The police always have been and remain concerned with much more than crime. This leads to a further myth—again promoted by political discourse—that police effectiveness can simply be measured in terms of crime rates, be they recorded or reported. Consequently, by measuring police effectiveness in narrow crime terms, we fail to attend to work that police play in maintaining social order and public safety.

From this prevailing perspective, the police are positioned as the best and most appropriate way to provide for a sense of security and safety across a wide range of social ills and potential threats, producing a pervasiveness of policing as governmental response. Loader and colleagues refer to this as constructing the role of police in terms of a ‘wide but shallow’ ambient sense of security.¹⁸

‘Security may be said to be “pervasive” when it becomes the prevailing discourse for understanding social problems, the lens through which they are defined, examined, and acted upon. It is pervasive when it begins, in these ways, to acquire a certain colonizing force, or “everywhereness,” when its claims and values ... prevail in areas of public life and policy ... where they have no proper business.’¹⁹

This contrasts with an account of the policing-security relationship that is ‘deep’—whereby policing is understood as fundamental to people’s sense of security—but ‘narrow’, in that the role of the police institutions are ‘limited to a reactive, minimal institution of last resort’.²⁰ This speaks to a symbolic meaning and importance of police, recognising the capacity of police practices to generate and communicate powerful social meanings. ‘Good policing’, as Neyroud and Beckley assert, is ‘minimal policing—minimally intrusive and carefully controlled in its use of force’.²¹ A commitment to ending an over-reliance on police as a singular response to an increasingly vast array of social ills demands paying due attention to the quality of the relationships forged between various state agencies and non-state auspices that can deploy dispersed knowledge, expertise, resources and capacities to solve particular social problems collaboratively.

The recent uplift in recruitment, via the additional 20,000 new police officers since 2019—after a decade of austerity and significant cuts to the policing and other public services workforce—offers a once in a generation opportunity for policing to rethink its purpose and restructure provision. However, this injection of public resources also risks reverting to traditional ways of organising and thinking about policing in ways that advance a ‘pervasive’ policing discourse rather than one that is minimally intrusive and rooted in partnership relations with other public service providers.

¹⁷D. Bayley, *Police for the Future*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 3, 10.

¹⁸B. Bradford, E. Girling, I. Loader and R. Sparks, ‘Policing and sense of place’, *British Journal of Criminology*, 2023, pp. 1–20.

¹⁹I. Loader, ‘Policing, recognition, and belonging’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 605, 2006, pp. 201–21, at pp. 208–9.

²⁰*Ibid.*, at p. 204.

²¹P. Neyroud and A. Beckley, *Policing Ethics and Human Rights*, London, Routledge, 2001, p. 21.

Right care, right person

The role of the police in dealing with mental health problems and responding to people in crises is an exemplar of everyday work with vulnerable people that police have dealt with across history and which currently takes up increasing amounts of police time. It is most evident that people in a vulnerable state are not necessarily best served by police officers, nor by being subjected to the criminal justice system. From an ethical perspective, a police response to a mental health incident may be harmful to the person in need. The encounter may well be experienced as degrading and stigmatising, perhaps particularly from the perspective of the person with mental health problems. Furthermore, the police lack the skills, training and knowledge necessary to provide adequate support, which can leave police officers themselves feeling inadequate, prompting a sense of moral injury. However, urgently protecting people at risk to themselves and others conforms well to Bittner's formula of the police role as first responders dealing with those situations where 'something-that-ought-not-to-be-happening-and-about-which-someone-had-better-do-something-now!'²²

The recent debate about the appropriateness of police responses to calls for service in relation to people with mental health needs highlights both the possibilities and pitfalls in seeking to refocus and rearticulate the role of the police. It has resulted in the National Partnership Agreement signed between health and policing organisations in July 2023.²³ It advances a Right Care, Right Person (RCRP) approach 'designed to ensure that people of all ages, who have health and/or social care needs, are responded to by the right person, with the right skills, training, and experience to best meet their needs'. It sets the parameters for a police response to a mental health-related incident: to investigate a crime that has occurred or is occurring; or to protect people

when there is a real and immediate risk of death or serious harm. It also requires local partners in England to work towards taking responsibility for individuals detained by police under Section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983, within one hour of that person arriving at the appropriate facility. In essence, the RCRP model changes the way emergency services respond to mental health calls, meaning police will not be automatically the first responders. The Partnership Agreement is currently being implemented (albeit at different stages in different areas) in every Home Office police force. The national rollout will significantly change the role the police play in responding to people with mental health problems. Moreover, the Partnership Agreement goes on to recognise that 'the [RCRP] approach can be applied more broadly than cases relating to mental health'. As such, in theory at least, it poses a fundamental and wide-ranging ethical challenge to all public services, including the police, involved in supporting vulnerable people, namely: how can people in need best access the right care and protection at the right time, by the right person (or service) and in the right place?

However, in the debate about the implementation of RCRP, the normative and ethical issues have taken something of a back seat—understandably perhaps—to the issues of demand management, workload and rationing limited resources. Announcing the agreement, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) led with the headline: 'one million officer hours saved with new approach to mental health'.²⁴ This figure was rather unhelpfully extrapolated from the savings deemed to have resulted from the one police force area, Humberside, where RCRP was piloted between 2019 and 2022.²⁵ Needless to say, this raised legitimate concerns for many

²²Bittner, *Aspects of Police Work*, p. 249.

²³Home Office and Department for Health and Social Care, 'National Partnership Agreement: Right Care, Right Person (RCRP)', GOV.UK, 26 July 2023; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-partnership-agreement-right-care-right-person/national-partnership-agreement-right-care-right-person-rcrp>.

²⁴National Police Chiefs' Council, '1M officer hours saved with new approach to mental health', 26 July 2023; <https://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/police-to-save-1-million-officer-hours-as-forces-adopt-new-model-to-ensure-specialist-care-for-health-incidents>.

²⁵Humberside Police, 'Right Care Right Person—Humberside Police', *College of Policing*, 3 April 2023; <https://www.college.police.uk/support-forces/practices/smarter-practice/right-care-right-person-humberside-police>.

working to support people with mental health problems. Dr Sarah Hughes, Chief Executive of Mind, cautioned:

The way this decision has been framed is deeply worrying and sends completely the wrong message to the public and to local police forces ... Above all, at the heart of any decision like this should be the people that the police serve not the potential hours of work saved. This announcement goes nowhere near offering enough guarantees that these changes will be introduced safely—there is no new funding attached and no explanation of how agencies will be held accountable.²⁶

Much concern has focussed on the lack of a robust evidence base to inform the policy, the speed at which the agreement is being rolled out across the country and the lack of resources that are accompanying implementation.²⁷ Moreover, there is a worrying absence of any systematic or coherent evaluation of the system-wide impacts of the reforms from which implementation lessons might be learnt. The Health and Social Care Select Committee of MPs, for instance, in late 2023 highlighted the ‘total lack of evaluation in terms of health outcomes or services’ and called for robust monitoring and evaluation to be put in place ‘to ensure patient safety, consistency and that people don’t fall through the cracks’.²⁸

The RCRP approach seeks to limit police involvement by introducing a threshold for determining whether police should be involved or not—namely whether the police are needed to investigate a crime that has

occurred or is occurring, or protect people, when there is a real and immediate risk to the life of a person, or of a person being subject to, or at risk of, serious harm. Positively, in its gestation in Humberside, it reflects the importance of a partnership approach to problem solving. In Humberside, the force established a multi-agency partnership ‘task and finish’ group with senior representatives from local authorities, mental health service providers, hospitals, Commissioning Groups and Ambulance Trusts. This established new processes that set out when the police involvement in health and welfare incidents is deemed inappropriate and could be dealt with better by another partner agency.

However, as with the broader history of problem-oriented policing (POP), the police-centred premise of the initiative has tended to stymie a more genuinely problem-oriented partnership.²⁹ The fact that the strategy was initiated on the basis of legal advice that Humberside Police sought to clarify where the limits to their duty of care responsibilities lie was perhaps unhelpful in this regard. This advice was used as a basis to support the development of the RCRP initiative, overshadowing the process with implicit threats of unilateral withdrawal. Moreover, the evaluation of the Humberside trial did not include any assessment of additional costs to local health care services, clinical outcomes or benefits and harms to the local population. Similarly, this clearly reflected the fact that the focus was on the costs and benefits to the police. The subsequent national agreement was also signed against a wider background of explicit and well-publicised threats by some senior police officers—including the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Mark Rowley—to withdraw altogether from attending emergency calls related to mental health incidents.³⁰ A genuine partnership approach initiated from the perspective of vulnerable people

²⁶Mind, ‘Mind reacts to UK Government announcement of Right Care, Right Person approach’, 25 July 2023; <https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/mind-reacts-to-uk-government-announcement-of-right-care-right-person-approach/>.

²⁷Royal College of Nursing, ‘RCN position on the National Partnership Agreement: Right Care, Right Person (RCRP)—practice and workforce implications’, 15 September 2023; <https://www.rcn.org.uk/About-us/Our-Influencing-work/Position-statements/rcn-position-on-the-national-partnership-agreement>.

²⁸Health and Social Care Committee, ‘Urgent answers needed on funding for “Right Care, Right Person” mental health strategy’, *UK Parliament*, 14 November 2023; <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/81/health-and-social-care-committee/news/198473/urgent-answers-needed-on-funding-for-right-care-right-person-mental-health-strategy/>.

²⁹K. Bullock, A. Sidebottom, R. Armitage, M. Ashby, C. Clemmow, S. Kirby, G. Laycock and N. Tilley, ‘Forty years of problem-oriented policing’, *Policing*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2021, pp. 2001–2014.

³⁰V. Dodd, ‘Met police to stop attending emergency mental health calls’, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2023; <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/may/28/met-police-to-stop-attending-emergency-mental-health-calls>.

in need of support—rather than the demands and interests of particular organisations—might look very different and address needs very differently.

Vulnerability, policing and public safety networks

Whether by default or design, the introduction of RCRP has reinvigorated long-standing debates about what role, if any, the police should play in responding to vulnerable people with mental health emergencies. It might equally be applied across a wide range of areas of work where the police are drawn into dealing with, managing and responding to vulnerable people in need of care, support or protection rather than criminalisation and control. The development of RCRP highlights the value of a place-based and problem-oriented partnership approach to restructuring and clarifying the role and contribution of diverse partners within a wider network of agencies in securing public safety and minimising harm—the police among others. The RCRP experience also warns against the dangers of structuring interorganisational dialogue and relations around the unilateral demands or requirements of a particular, powerful agency—in this instance, the police—with less regard to the interests and impacts on all partners and the well-being of the vulnerable groups themselves. A preferable premise would be to decentre the police from such deliberations, as a starting point, and rather, to centre on the nature of the harm problem in response to which the resources, knowledge and capacity of a diversity of actors—state and non-state—might best be harnessed. Ensuring the voices and lived experiences of those vulnerable groups that are the subject of interventions are listened to would then afford opportunities to restructure public services in ways that construct citizens not as passive consumers, but rather, as active co-producers of services. Adding to this debate, Fleetwood and Lea have recently proposed an alternative starting point, which removes the police as the gateway to other services—and thus the police's power to define a problem in ways that can inadvertently or otherwise hasten criminalisation and coercion:

What needs to be ended is police insistence on not only automatic status of first responder but also the discretionary power to reframe complex issues—such as mental health, homelessness or drug use—as crime and therefore with supposed criminal justice solutions. In simple terms, we propose a radical shift in the role of police, radically restricting their scope and autonomy.³¹

They argue for placing the control of responses to an array of social problems in the hands of a new third-party agency that is independent from the police. This 'controller' authority would serve as the *de facto* coordinator of the response of 'a diversity of specialist welfare and other agencies'.³² It is their contention that in every case, the necessity of police intervention should be assessed by welfare agencies rather than the necessity of welfare intervention being decided by the police. The value of such a proposal lies in that it addresses some of the operational issues that derive from particular incidents and drive decision making on the ground with regard to who serves not only as first responder, but also who has the discretionary power to frame complex issues—such as mental illness, drug/alcohol use or homelessness—as crime problems rather than welfare issues.

Reconfigured public safety networks will necessitate organisation and governance to mitigate power imbalances. As the RCRP example illustrates, this is by no means easy. Networks, by necessity, comprise mutually dependent, but operationally autonomous entities that interact through often conflict-ridden negotiations. This requires an institutionalised framework of rules, norms, shared knowledge and exchange. Shared understanding, in this context, demands that the partners appreciate each other's positions well enough to have meaningful dialogue about the different interpretations of the problem, and to exercise collective wisdom regarding how best to seek to resolve it, as well as the relative contribution of each. Fashioning such a dialogue and

³¹J. Fleetwood and J. Lea, 'Defunding the police in the UK: critical questions and practical suggestions', *The Howard Journal*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2023, pp. 167–184, at p. 176.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 177.

network formation is challenging given that, as Huxham and Vangen note:

The possibility for collaborative advantage rests in most cases on drawing synergy from the differences between organisations, different resources and different expertises. Yet those same differences stem from different organisational purposes and these inevitably mean that they will seek different benefits from each other out of the collaboration.³³

The interorganisational and interpersonal trust and reciprocity necessary are more likely to circulate through place-based, bottom-up initiatives. Moreover, the development of a policy discourse around a focus on vulnerability offers a shared language or ‘boundary object’ in Star’s terms that allows different groups, actors and professions to work together *without consensus*.³⁴

The recognition of vulnerability in victimisation and offending has become a powerful element influencing contemporary policing. Since the tragic death of Fiona Pilkington and her daughter in 2007 and deferred acknowledgement that police failed to protect vulnerable children and young people from various forms of exploitation and abuse—including the grooming of young girls subject to sexual exploitation and the exploitation of children by county lines drug networks. As a policy frame, vulnerability has come to play a more prominent and contentious role since the mid-2000s.³⁵ Vulnerability remains poorly defined and complex, yet fundamentally important. The College of Policing offers the broad definition that: ‘a person is vulnerable if as a result of their situation or circumstances, they are unable to take care or protect themselves or others from harm or exploitation’.³⁶

³³C. Huxham and S. Vangen, *Managing to Collaborate: The Theory and Practice of Collaborative Advantage*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 820.

³⁴S. L. Star, ‘This is not a boundary object: reflections on the origin of a concept’, *Science, Technology & Human Values*, vol. 35, no. 5, 2010, pp. 601–617.

³⁵See K. Brown, ‘The governance of vulnerability’, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, vol. 37, no. 11–12, 2017, pp. 667–682.

³⁶College of Policing, ‘Introduction to vulnerability-related risk’, 18 November 2021; <https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/vulnerability-related-risks/introduction-vulnerability-related-risk>.

However, it remains open to interpretation in ways that can serve to pathologise and undermine individual agency. For some, it is associated with a politics of austerity, the prioritisation of scarce public resources, and can serve to marginalise further those who might be considered the most vulnerable in society.

More progressively, however, vulnerability as a perspective from which to think systemically about the precarious relation between care and control in public safety and welfare explicitly calls into question dichotomous representations of ‘ideal’ victims and ‘dangerous’ offenders. It highlights the multifaceted, relational and interdependent nature of—and interactions between—diverse social harms. Further, it evokes a focus on prevention and up-stream interventions, rather than merely responding to events after they have occurred. Most radically, it can serve to highlight those people whose vulnerability derives from their peripheral, adversarial or problematic relationship with the police as an institution—and other public authorities—namely those whose who, owing to their social disadvantage, marginalisation and deviant or transgressive lifestyles, are often the traditional ‘objects’ of police attention. As such, vulnerability provides a valuable lens through which to interrogate the future of policing as a public good and explore how it might be differently refocussed, prioritised and delivered. It centres on harm, abuse and exploitation in a way that aligns with public health approaches to policing and decentres criminality, stigmatisation and blame. It affords a perspective from which to understand the interactions, spill-over effects and gaps between various public services and other agencies, as well as from which to redesign whole-system responses to public safety that incorporate and harness the role of diverse public, private and third sector organisations and to clarify the role of the police within that system.

In conclusion

Given that police activity is a largely reactive response to citizens’ demands, shaped by cultural expectations and the (in)activities of other organisations, policing always risks being drawn into a vicious cycle of simply responding to increasing demand rather than

(pro-)actively shaping it. The policing and criminal justice system remains overly reactive, with insufficient attention to harm prevention and upstream action. A fundamental shift to holistic preventive approaches is long overdue. Consequently, as this article has sought to argue, there is a long-standing and overriding need to redesign a whole-system approach to public safety that goes far beyond, and by necessity decentres, the role of the police. This will require us to be much clearer about the bounded role of the police within a wider network of public safety and what legitimately can be expected of them, without raising unrealistic or unattainable expectations. Rather than passing more social problems to the police to manage, we need to consider what contribution the police can make—given their capabilities, skills and resources—in helping resolve harm-related problems and whether others might be better placed to solve them. This should enable us to focus on what the police could do—in partnership with others or as a single service—to enrich the quality of public safety and support vulnerable people. The challenge for public safety

and policing—broadly conceived—is not simply to manage need, but also to create capability and foster genuine problem-oriented partnerships that address the needs of vulnerable groups through the provision of best access to the right care and protection at the right time, from the right people or services.

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