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Emerging Victims in Contemporary Drugs Policing

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Recent shifts in UK policy have seen certain populations, who were predominantly viewed as offenders due to their involvement in drug offences, increasingly recognized as victims of exploitation. Drawing on qualitative data from three studies, this article interrogates how this trend is playing out within contemporary drugs policing, focussing on officers' responses to people affected by: drug addiction, child criminal exploitation and 'cuckooing'. It examines the tensions that arise as these three categories of emergent drug victims conflict with officers' normative expectations of victimhood, perceptions of their role as police and existing operational strategies. It also reveals officers' attempts to (re)gain ontological security by policing the boundaries of victimhood and re-focussing on new categories of offender.

KEY WORDS: victims, drugs, policing, cuckooing, child criminal exploitation, people who use drugs

INTRODUCTION

People who use and/or supply illicit drugs are often vulnerable to victimization. However, in the field of drugs policing, the concept of this population's 'victimhood' has traditionally been located on the margins of scholarly interest. There are two main reasons for this. First, drug offences have long represented classic examples of 'victimless crimes' in academic discussions (Schur 1965; Skolnick 1966). Viewing 'crime' as an outcome of social interaction (Becker 1963; Young 1971), labelling theorists conceptualized the use and supply of illicit drugs as 'crimes without victims' that are 'created when we attempt to ban through criminal legislation the exchange between willing partners of strongly desired goods and services' (Schur 1974: 6). Such positioning of drug offences as 'victimless' has led to analytical focus predominantly being placed on the injustices and structural violence experienced by people who use and/or supply drugs. This focus is vital, especially given the disproportionate policing and criminalization of people of colour and the economically marginalized (Shiner *et al.* 2018; Koram 2019), however, drug offenders' experiences of interpersonal victimization and how this is perceived

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by the police has not reached the same level of analytic concern. Second, in criminal justice policy, the criminalization of the possession and supply of drugs has created a barrier to accessing victim status among people implicated in these offences. The roles of 'victim' and 'offender' are normatively conceived as antithetical (Rock 1998; McEvoy and McConnachie 2012). This dichotomization inhibits the recognition of drug offenders as victims, particularly in the context of policing, where there are 'few models … for prioritizing an individual's victimization over any potential criminal involvement' (Farrell *et al.* 2015: 326).

Despite these corollaries of criminalization, recent policy developments and discursive framings regarding drug offences and offenders suggest that issues relating to victimization are becoming increasingly salient within drugs policing in the United Kingdom. The 'drug problem' that police attempt to address is complex and multifaceted. Typically focussed on those using and/or selling 'problem' drugs—principally, though not exclusively, heroin and crack cocaine—policymakers have tended to frame the drug problem as a crime issue and concentrated their efforts on reducing drug-related offending through criminal justice interventions (Seddon *et al.* 2012). While this focus remains, there has been a notable shift in recognizing and responding to the problem of victimization experienced by this cohort. An observable trend within national policy has been an increasing willingness to conceptualize certain offenders, who may have previously only been criminalized for their involvement in illicit drug markets, as victims. Three core, interrelating policy domains have served to influence this new direction in police responses to certain people involved in certain types of drug-related crime.

This trend partly originates in the rise of the UK's 'modern slavery agenda' (Gadd and Broad 2018), which has emerged in the context of wider international attention to the issue (O'Connell Davidson 2015). The *Modern Slavery Strategy* (HM Government 2014), and subsequent typology of modern slavery offences (Home Office 2017), identified victims of 'criminal exploitation'—individuals coerced into the commission of crimes, typically fraud and drug offences including cannabis cultivation and 'county lines' drug distribution—as an issue of concern. Moreover, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 introduced a statutory defence for victims who commit certain offences as a direct consequence of exploitation. Although not without significant limitations, the defence widens the legal scope with which to recognize some offenders as having victim status (Knight 2023). Changes brought about through the modern slavery agenda have increased pressure on the police to identify individuals who commit offences as a result of exploitation as victims.

The emergence of the victim in drugs policing has also aligned with and been influenced by the development of the 'vulnerability zeitgeist' (Brown 2015: 4). In the United Kingdom, as in other jurisdictions, the need to recognize and respond to the vulnerabilities of specific populations is now embedded in a range of policies and practices (Cooper and Norton 2017), including drug policy (Brown and Wincup 2020), policing (Asquith *et al.* 2017; Dehaghani 2019) and 'contextual safeguarding' approaches that recognize wider vulnerabilities experienced by children outside the home (Firmin 2020). Accordingly, increased attention has been given to safeguarding duties and specialist interventions, in ways that have been identified as heightening support, surveillance and control of 'vulnerable groups' (Aliverti 2020; Brown and Wincup 2020). Vulnerability remains a trait that is associated with the successful assignment of victim status (Christie 1986; Duggan 2018; Aliverti 2020). This greater focus on the vulnerability of people involved in drug-related offending therefore creates space for their subsequent recognition as victims.

Finally, the rise of public health approaches to policing is also relevant (Christmas and Srivastava 2019; College of Policing 2021). This conception of policing recognizes that much offending is rooted in complex social problems and seeks to address the underlying causes through prevention and early intervention. As a result, there is more widespread awareness of

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the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences on individuals who come into contact with the police (Bateson *et al.* 2020; Gillespie-Smith *et al.* 2020). These experiences include victimization. Burgeoning interest in police drug diversion provides a noteworthy example of this approach. A growing number of UK police forces have implemented schemes to divert people who use drugs (PWUD) away from the criminal justice system and into support services for educational or therapeutic interventions, despite being caught for simple possession or other drug-related offences (Shaw *et al.* 2022; Bacon 2024). Contemporary models of diversion generally recognize people dependent on drugs as vulnerable and view them through a trauma-informed lens that acknowledges the interrelation of victimization and offending.

In the context of these policy shifts, several 'problem' populations variously involved in drug offences and seen to be part of the 'drug problem' through their offending are now being simultaneously framed, and sometimes even predominantly understood, in relation to their capacity to be victimized. This includes people experiencing drug dependence as victims of trauma, addiction and drug suppliers, young people involved in 'county lines' drug supply as victims of child criminal exploitation (CCE), and people who use heroin and crack cocaine who have their homes taken over as victims of 'cuckooing'. While briefly mentioned in the previous drug strategy (HM Government 2017), these issues are emphasized in *From Harm to Hope* (HM Government 2021), where safeguarding and victim support are positioned as priorities. CCE and cuckooing also feature in HM Government's (2018) *Serious Violence Strategy* and the Home Office's (2023) *Strategic Policing Requirement*. Although important not to overstate its novelty, this represents a genuine shift in the drugs policing field, opening up important avenues for analysis.

This article provides a novel interrogation of police officers' perceptions of the emergence of the figure of the victim within drugs policing, considering the implications for police culture and practice. We draw on qualitative data generated through three independent projects. Covering different research topics, questions and settings, these data are unified by their emphasis on generating new insights into how police officers, as 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980), are interpreting, responding to and acting on shifts in policy at the coalface. The article analyses how officers navigate the tensions that arise when emergent categories of drugs victim conflict with normative expectations of victimhood, perceptions of the role of the police, and existing operational strategies within drugs policing. Furthermore, it examines officers' attempts to (re) gain ontological security when faced with moral ambiguities and uncertain legal boundaries, by policing the boundaries of victimhood and re-focussing on new categories of offender. The analysis makes a significant contribution by interrogating police perspectives on this influential policy trend, laying foundations for future analyses to incorporate the views of those identified as potential drugs victims, and the use and utility of the concept of victimhood itself.

VICTIM RECOGNITION AS A SOCIAL PROCESS

The emergence and recognition of people as victims is a process of social recognition through which victim status must be acquired, affirmed and maintained (Quinney 1972; Holstein and Miller 1990; Strobl 2010). These complex contested social processes occur at the macro-level, through policy discourses that create possibilities for recognizing new types of victim (see e.g. Melrose and Pearce 2013 on the emergence of the victim of child sexual exploitation); and at the micro-level, through interactions between potential victims and those who recognize and affirm victim status (see e.g. Dunn 2001 on 'accomplishing' victim status in stalking cases).

Critical victimology stresses the importance of the social processes through which victim status emerges (Walklate 2007). Research aligned with this perspective has explored the barriers and facilitators of victim recognition (van Dijk 2009; Meyers 2011), including the influence of gendered (Dunn 2016), racialized (Long 2018) and other social dynamics (Duggan 2018) on

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levels of access to victim status; and people's agentic experiences of accepting or rejecting the 'victim' label (Fohring 2018). Regarding influences on the emergence of victim status, the most salient point for the purposes of this article stems from Christie's (1986: 18) assertion that 'victims that merge with offenders make for bad victims'. Within a drug policy environment predicated on criminalization, the assignment of victim status to people involved in drug use and/or supply remains stymied by the normative dichotomization of 'victim' and 'offender' identities.

Critical victimology also emphasizes how the 'victim' label is not produced in a vacuum, with 'social, political and legal conditions' (Spencer and Walklate 2016: xi) shaping possibilities for the emergence of victim status for specific individuals or groups (Walklate 2007). The police play a key role in attributing victim status and initiating criminal justice processes. As Charman (2020) emphasizes, however, these decisions are often based on culturally defined notions of what a 'victim' might constitute. It is therefore important to consider the impact of police culture on the potential to conceptualize individuals as victims in the context of drug offences.

POLICE CULTURE AND VICTIM IDENTIFICATION

The concept of 'police culture' concerns the shared attitudes, values and beliefs which influence how police officers carry out their work. It is a pivotal element of academic and policy discourse on policing. This attention largely derives from the considerable discretion exercised by police officers, which has a significant impact on the service that different sections of society receive, as well as how laws, policies and organizational guidelines are translated into practice (Loftus 2009; Bowling *et al.* 2019). Correspondingly, a key proposition of the complementary street-level bureaucracy theory is that the decisions and actions of frontline workers become the policies of the agencies they work for because this is how policy is experienced by citizens (Lipsky 1980).

Since Skolnick (1966) first sketched out the police 'working personality', researchers have endeavoured to understand the everyday realities of policing by examining the 'cognitive lenses' through which officers view the problems and people that populate their occupational environment. Commonly observed traits include a sense of mission, cynicism, conservatism, suspicion and an 'us' and 'them' mindset (Bowling *et al.* 2019: 171–180). These characteristics can lead to problematic stereotyping and a tendency to categorize members of the public into distinct groups. People who supply drugs, for example, especially organized criminals and, more recently, those operating county lines networks, are often viewed as 'good-class villains' (174)—or archetypal 'bad guys'—who are worth pursuing and deserving of criminal sanctions (Collison 1995; Bacon 2016; Spicer 2021*a*). PWUD, on the other hand, generally falls within the category of 'police property' (Lee 1981: 53), a term used to describe marginal groups that are seen as immoral or criminogenic by the dominant majority and 'over whom the police successfully exert superior power' (Lister *et al.* 2008; Loftus 2009). 'Rubbish' are people who make calls on the police which are deemed 'messy, intractable, unworthy of attention or the complainant's own fault' (Bowling *et al.* 2019: 175). This category might include people who commit drug offences presenting themselves as victims. Alternatively, drug offenders might be categorized as 'disarmers', people with an 'uncertain status' who can 'weaken or neutralize police work' (Holdaway 1983: 77), if their perceived vulnerability makes them hard to deal with as suspects or victims.

Police culture shapes how the police identify, classify and respond to victims of crime. Judgements about victims' moral worth, social context, culpability and demographics play a role in police perceptions and decisions. Hawk and Dabney (2014) found that perceptions of 'victim deservedness' influence how detectives approach homicide investigations. 'True victim' cases were prioritized over those that involved a 'precipitating victim'. The typification of a precipitating victim was imposed upon those who were perceived as immersed in a 'criminal

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lifestyle', provoked the violence or put themselves in harm's way. Charman (2020) also argues that officers are key definers of victim status and make sharp distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims. She found that officers rejected or down-played victim status owing to preconceived ideas about a potential victim's identity. This decision was often based on police views about how and where people live. Victims who did not conform with societal norms of 'respectability', such as PWUD, were particularly likely to have their status as victims overlooked.

It is important to remember, however, that police culture is neither monolithic nor static (Chan 1997; Bowling *et al.* 2019). Cultural variations are shaped by differences between roles, ranks, organizations and localities. 'The police' are a heterogeneous social group and police officers exercise agency when putting their cultural resources to work. This is demonstrated by how police officers vary in their perceptions of PWUD and how best to deal with them (Bacon 2016; 2022; Marks *et al.* 2017). Espeute and Lanskey (2023) similarly found that decisions to recognize children as victims of county lines varied amongst police officers. Moreover, while certain core characteristics have endured (Loftus 2009), police culture is constantly evolving as officers adapt to new experiences, pressures and problems, the changeable nature of the occupation and the wider social, political and legal context. In her longitudinal study of police socialization, identity and culture, Charman (2017) found that new cultural resources were emerging 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 more on public protection, reassurance and safeguarding. Relatedly, Aliverti (2020) demonstrates the increasing 'institutionalization' of a focus on issues of vulnerability and safeguarding, which she characterizes as a 'humanitarian turn' in policing. Her research reveals the moral tensions and dilemmas involved in exercising state coercion and safeguarding vulnerable individuals in the context of migration policing. These insights relate closely to recent changes in the drugs policing field.

This article brings together insights from critical victimology and research into police culture to explore responses to emerging victim figures within contemporary drugs policing. While existing research has examined concepts adjacent to victimhood, most commonly 'vulnerability', in relation to policing (Aliverti 2020) and drugs policy (Brown and Wincup 2020), less attention has been given to victim status. The explicit consideration of victim status is important because it is distinct from vulnerability in several ways. Vulnerability is a relatively malleable and nebulous concept (Brown *et al.* 2017), oriented towards hypothetical and potential issues of risk (Walklate 2011), whereas the use of the term 'victim' seeks to categorize past events, and is associated with a narrower, more rigid set of normative expectations (Minow 1992). Moreover, victim status has more significant legal implications than 'vulnerability', particularly in terms of the potential for diversion from prosecution in England and Wales. Additionally, while existing policy documents increasingly identify the emergence of victim figures in drugs policing, research is yet to consider how officers are responding to and implementing these policies at the level of frontline practice.

METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in subsequent sections are drawn from three independent projects undertaken by the authors between 2018 and 2022. While our respective studies are concerned with different aspects of policing, they are united by using qualitative methods to explore the everyday realities of police work and examine how recent policy developments relating to victims in the drugs field are being interpreted and enacted across England and Wales.

Marshall's research (Study 1) on victim identification was conducted between 2019 and 2020 within one English county. It involved semi-structured interviews with 50 practitioners

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working on issues of CCE, including 12 police officers, and 17 young people affected by CCE, as well as observations of youth offending service-led activities relating to cases of CCE, the majority of which had police input. Bacon's research (Study 2) focussed on police drug diversion and other harm reduction measures at the interface between law enforcement and public health. Fieldwork took place during 2018 and 2019. The main strand of the methodology comprised semi-structured interviews with practitioners in 11 police service areas. In total, 48/3 interviews were carried out with police officers/staff, 14 with police & crime comissioners (PCCs) and their teams and 16 with members of partner organizations. Spicer's research (Study 3) focussed specifically on cuckooing. Twenty-six semi-structured interviews, informed by the risk environment framework (Rhodes 2002), were undertaken during 2021 and 2022 with a range of stakeholders in one police service area who had experience of working on relevant cases. In addition to those working in drug services, housing and outreach, seven of the interviewees were police officers (two sergeants and five constables). All participants quoted in this article are police officers. More detailed methodological discussions on each of the studies are provided in Marshall (2022*b*), Bacon (2022; 2024) and Spicer (forthcoming).

Initial interest in writing this article on emerging victims in contemporary drugs policing developed from conversations between the authors. After reflection, it was agreed that the studies had sufficient methodological and theoretical congruence to enable a rigorous multi-study analysis. Data for each study were re-analysed using the principles proposed by Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive approach to thematic analysis. This analysis was guided by a hybrid process of deductive and inductive reasoning based on Layder's (1998) 'adaptive theory'. Sensitizing concepts were developed by reviewing existing literature and policy documents. Primacy was then given to generating analytical insights led by the interview data. While there are inevitably limitations to the analysis of data from independent projects with diverse aims, we sought to manage and address any potential concerns via reflexive discussion during the analytical process. Through the thematic coding process, we identified three categories of emergent drugs victim—people affected by drug addiction, CCE and cuckooing—as well as key ways in which these victim/offenders generated tension and conflict for officers, and evidence of officers' attempts to navigate this. Ultimately, by bringing our data together we believe we have produced an output that is greater than the sum of its parts.

During analysis, we were mindful of the timeframe across the projects and alert to any significant events or policy developments that might have impacted the data. *From Harm to Hope* (HM Government 2021), for example, became the national drug strategy while Study 3 was being conducted. Data were collected prior to and in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, a time that witnessed changes to drug markets, police activities and capabilities (Aldridge *et al.* 2021; Brewster *et al.* 2021). However, commonalities in our findings suggest that, while aspects of police responses to victims of exploitation might have varied over the course of the research period, police perceptions of victim status remained consistent.

Ethical approval was granted by the relevant university, police and/or local authority ethics committees, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Police service areas are not identified in the findings to protect confidentiality and each participant has been ascribed an anonymous unique identifier. All participant names used here are pseudonyms, with their study of origin attributed after each quote (e.g. Study 1).

EMERGING VICTIMS IN DRUGS POLICING

Our research demonstrates police awareness of three specific examples of potential victims that have emerged in and/or been shaped by policy relating to contemporary drugs policing. Each category reflects a repositioning of individuals who, in the past, have been predominantly

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understood as offenders. PWUD, principally those identified as 'addicts', are being viewed by some officers as victims of the crimes that contributed to their drug use and victims of drug suppliers who exploit their dependence and socio-economic marginalization. For young people who might previously have been criminalized for their involvement in drug supply, there is now a possibility that they may be identified as victims of CCE. Similarly, where vulnerable people who use heroin and/or crack whose homes are used for dealing drugs might previously have been criminalized for possession and supply offences, the potential now exists to identify them as victims of the exploitative practice known as 'cuckooing'. While there is variation in the nature of the police response to these emergent examples of victimization, they each represent nascent attempts to see victims where the justice system has tended to see offenders. In this section, we elaborate on these emergent victim categories within drugs policing.

Interviews revealed that the shift towards conceptualizing people who experience problems with drug use as victims is perhaps the most established of these three categories in the police milieu. When asked for their views on this cohort, officers regularly positioned them as victims of circumstance, with drug use providing a coping mechanism for traumatic events and living in adverse community environments:

> [P]eople have just had horrendously shit lives, been exposed to all manner of huge traumas and it's completely understandable they would have found themselves vulnerable to being exploited or being attracted to what taking Class A drugs can offer. (John, Study 2)
>
> We are criminalising somebody because they have got an addiction problem, but the addiction is in part due to the fact they were raped … 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 because we haven't understood the real reason why somebody is in front of us. (Anne, Study 2)

Such viewpoints were shaped by officers' experiences of drugs policing, social interactions with PWUD and knowledge about the nature, causes and effects of addiction. This has been advanced through recent developments in the vulnerability agenda and public health approaches to policing (Bacon 2022; 2024). For the most part, police officers subscribed to the notion that drug addiction is a brain disease (Grifell and Hart 2018)—albeit intricately connected to multiple complex problems, such as mental health, structural disadvantages and social isolation—describing people who are dependent on drugs as less able to exercise agency or make rational decisions. These traits, when combined with their social marginalization, put PWUD at risk of exploitation by those involved in drug supply:

> I see [drug users] as victims because to me they have been victims of unscrupulous dealers. (Pete, Study 2)

Within this framing, PWUD are positioned as victims in that drug dealers exploit their lack of ability to exercise meaningful control over whether or not they continue to engage in the criminalized activity of drug use. The fact that certain drugs can result in physical/mental illness, overdose and death added an extra layer to their victim status, as suppliers knowingly put them at risk of harm. At both a moral and practical level, justifications therefore exist to attempt to divert PWUD away from the criminal justice process, rather than pursuing prosecutions for simple possession or an offence related to their drug use that could trap them into a cyclical relationship with the system (Bacon 2024).

The second category of victim that has emerged within drugs policing is the victim of CCE. The Home Office (2017) describes CCE as the coercion, control, manipulation or deception of

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a child into any criminal activity. CCE can occur in relation to any form of crime, but is closely associated with county lines drug dealing, where individuals travelling out from cities facilitate the sale of drugs in coastal, rural and market towns (Coomber and Moyle 2018; Spicer 2021*b*). Within this model, young people typically work as runners or dealers, undertaking 'visible and high risk selling practices' (Windle *et al.* 2020: 5). While the response to such individuals previously centred on criminalization for supply offences, additional possibilities now exist to divert young people from the criminal justice system, as victims of CCE. This includes the use of the Section 45 defence under the Modern Slavery Act 2015, or criminal justice practitioner discretion to divert the child towards safeguarding interventions (Ministry of Justice 2019). Officers appreciated the role that exploitation could play in facilitating young people's participation in county lines supply, particularly in contexts where socio-economic pressures were significant:

> If someone comes into the estate, if they are deprived socially and they are offered free chicken and chips or a Nando's or a pair of trainers or a £10 top up on their phone, you know they are essentially grooming them. So some of the kids that are being found with the drugs are looked at and treated as victims. (Adam, Study 2)

Paralleling increased attention to CCE at the national policy level, officers expressed an awareness of CCE as an issue of concern:

> [I]t's become abundantly clear that criminal exploitation is a significant problem across our county. (Sally, Study 1)

Officers therefore indicated both that they were aware of the potential for young people involved in county lines to be victims of CCE and viewed this as a significant issue within their work.

The final emergent category of drugs victim involves people who use heroin and/or crack and who are exposed to drug market activity. Specifically, this concerns people who might previously have been considered criminally culpable for facilitating the supply of drugs from their homes now being positioned as potential victims of 'cuckooing' (Spicer *et al.* 2020). Named after the nest invading tendencies of cuckoo birds, the identification of this practice recognizes the capacity for people to have their home taken over by people involved in drug supply. In addition to losing control of this space, they can experience violence, exploitation and be forced into undertaking low-level supply-related activities (Moyle 2019). Although not the only 'vulnerable' population affected by this 'home takeover' practice (Macdonald *et al.* 2024), people who use heroin and/or crack are considered particularly vulnerable due to cuckooing's close association with this illicit drug market and their often multiple complex needs. Accordingly, officers situated this type of victimization as a by-product of a burgeoning local drug market and the actors involved:

> So me in my patch, and it's not just solely me but the PCSOs too, will have almost a list - if it's not on paper, it's in their minds - of people to check in on because they're vulnerable to cuckooing because of their Class A use. So where I work, cuckooing is almost daily business because one of the main issues we have is drugs. (Clara, Study 3)

The emergence of cuckooing as a form of victimization has reconfigured how domestic drug spaces are interpreted (Spicer 2021*c*). Previously, a property occupied by a range of drug market actors might have been viewed by police officers as a 'crack house' (Briggs 2010), with all those present considered offenders. Now, there is greater recognition of the potential power imbalance between the occupant and others, the lack of choice they may have about the situation, and the exploitation they may be experiencing. While often involved in drug possession, as well as having a history of drug-related offending and possibly low-level supply offences, by identifying

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the complex realities of these scenarios and recognizing the vulnerabilities of those affected, this population is now often being afforded victim status.

It is notable that these three examples of emergent victims in the context of drugs policing are relatively diverse in terms of their typical demographic characteristics, drug market role(s), and how they have (previously) been criminalized as drug offenders. Yet similar factors underpin the emergent recognition of them as victims. All three cases reflect an increased sensitivity to the role that exploitation, in various guises, may play in individuals' participation in criminalized activities. Specifically, there is greater recognition, albeit to varying degrees, of the potential for the coercion of individuals into crime, by a third party or parties, where imbalances of power exist.

TENSIONS AND CONFLICTS IN THE POLICING OF DRUGS VICTIMS

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the complexities and moral ambiguities, the emergence of these victims in the context of drugs policing has created tensions and conflicts for officers. Identifying these victims is complicated by their status as 'deviant victims' (Dunn 2016) who do not conform to expectations associated with the attribution of victim status. Because emerging drugs victims are victimized in the context of their participation in drug use and/or drug-related offences, they embody two positionalities that are normatively positioned as antithetical: victim and offender (Christie 1986; Rock 1998; McEvoy and McConnachie 2012). The normative positioning of 'victim' and 'offender' as irreconcilable, impermeable opposites (Long 2018) made it challenging for officers to reconceptualize individuals involved in criminalized activities, especially those who have traditionally been placed within the culturally defined categories of 'villains' or 'police property' (Bowling *et al.* 2019), as victims. As one officer noted:

> [T]hese people who've been out nicking or out on the street using Class A, we're now calling them victims? I don't find it easy. (Stephen, Study 3)

Officers highlighted that the two positionalities remained in an uneasy coexistence, which was difficult to navigate and had to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Reflecting on a case where a group of young people were treated as victims—in the face of opposition from within the organization—but continued to deal drugs and went on to perpetrate a stabbing, Eryk (Study 2) explained that:

> [T]o my mind nothing is black or white … [T]hey may be a victim of something, exploitation, but they're also committing serious crime, and so I found it very difficult to put someone just in a victim box when you can see people's behaviour changing and becoming more dangerous.

The persistence of conceptualizations of 'victim' and 'offender', not just as simultaneously presenting categories but ones that did not mix, generated tension and seemingly inhibited officers' capacities to fully accept the emergent categories of victims in drugs policing.

Additionally, the reconceptualization of offenders as victims was made more challenging as potential victims often struggled to conform to normative expectations that provide individuals perceived as 'socially respectable' and compliant with greater access to victim status (Christie 1986; Duggan 2018). Such expectations affected police perceptions of 'victim deservedness' (Hawk and Dabney 2014; Charman 2020). Officers described the daily grind of engaging with the same population of PWUD for the same offences, which could be a challenging and unpleasant experience:

> [Q]uite often we are dealing with people for low-level crimes, which often have drug use as probably the overarching motivating factor in the background, but they might not be very

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> nice individuals, they might be quite aggressive, they might be dangerous to deal with, when officers get there, and I wouldn't say there's much pity amongst the occupational culture for people that are drug users in general. (John, Study 2)

The impact of these encounters on victim status was exacerbated by stigma associated with drug addiction. Darrell (Study 2), a senior officer, recounted a meeting during which he encouraged a new recruit who was about to execute a drugs warrant to reflect on why heroin users might commit supply offences and to look out for evidence of exploitation:

> [T]hey looked at me in complete horror and the words from this PC was, "What, you telling me we should treat smackheads as victims now?" … [I]t really struck home to me that it doesn't matter what we do, you've still got this entrenched view, you know, particularly around heroin, you know, that it's horrible, it's dirty therefore the users are horrible, they are vile, they are dirty and they are nothing more than kind of scummy people, and it's really hard to break that.

Relatedly, officers expressed frustrations with individuals who struggled to engage with support. Despite being of the view that PWUD '*are completely victim of this market*', their body, brain and lifestyle '*corrupted by it*', Jason (Study 2) felt exasperated by them because most had been offered drug treatment on multiple occasions:

> I am seeing the same faces come into custody all the time and it's just like, why have you broken into that car again and you have nicked a shitty radio that you are going to get ten quid for, just to buy a bit of crack and yet there is a provision in place to help you.

This stood in tension with the view that 'genuine' victims gratefully accept support and transition out of experiences of harm on a relatively short timescale (Miers 1990; Cole 2007; Strobl 2010). In both cases, perceived lack of conformity to the normative expectations associated with legitimate victim status created barriers to officers' recognition of individuals as 'true' victims. Where victim status was recognized, emerging victims in drugs policing were generally seen as 'precipitating victims' (Hawk and Dabney 2014) who played a part in their victimization through their life choices.

While the status of individuals as 'deviant victims' (Dunn 2016) created moral tensions and practical challenges, officers also described deeper conflicts that emergent drugs victims caused for the police as an organization. Officers described the focus on victimization as a significant departure from '*usual traditional police work*' (Michael, Study 1), which was—in line with enduring aspects of police culture (Loftus 2009)—conceived of as fighting crime and bringing offenders to justice. The following comments from Simon (Study 1), an officer within a recently formed specialist child exploitation team, demonstrate the struggle to adjust to an approach that could feel like it went against conventional models of policing:

> The police role is to protect society and to lock up the bad people … So the police aren't the soft touch, that's not what they are, that's not how they operate. But we are having to adjust to this now because, you know, seeing an offender actually being a victim, it's quite a difficult one to get your head around really. It's a whole change of direction.

Simon's comments evoke the idea of an offender who he is being asked to see as a victim, rather than a victim outright. This uncertainty is tangled up in his perceived function of the police—'*to lock up the bad people*'—and thereby with a concern that by '*seeing an offender actually being a*

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victim' this function may not be adequately served. Similarly, Michael (Study 1), an officer in the same exploitation-focussed team, described the challenge of overlooking offences that individuals may have been involved in:

> We try not to get involved in the offences that they're being investigated for, but at the end of the day, we are the police and we can't overlook those.

Michael demonstrates a conviction that addressing the offences committed by a person is an intrinsic and almost inescapable part of policing, one that is difficult to set aside. Responding to these emerging groups of victims creates tension by requiring an ontological shift regarding fundamental ideas about the role of the police.

The tension generated by the emerging figure of the drugs victim was practical as well as cultural. It created challenges for officers by questioning the utility of established police responses to drug-related crime. Officers described cases of dealing with victims of exploitation, where conventional police responses to drug offences became iatrogenic. A key concern was the issue created by the confiscation of drugs and/or money by the police from individuals who were victims of CCE or being forced into supply activities as part of being cuckooed. Officers described how this could place victims at risk of physical harm:

> I've been in those anxious positions where you've taken drugs off somebody who is a user-dealer and you know that they are going to get beaten up for that. (Jean, Study 3)

These scenarios generated anxiety about whether established police practices were always appropriate for new drugs victims. Relatedly, there was also recognition of creating a risk that the victim would be placed in a position of debt, further entrenching them in situations of exploitation:

> [W]e see the children very much as being victims … try to support them, try to get them out of the criminality. But actually everything that we do quite often puts them at risk, or some of the things we do I think puts them at risk … Just by arresting them, we are presenting them with more risk because we're taking their drugs off them and then they have a drugs debt. (Melissa, Study 1)
>
> If you seize somebody's drugs and their cash, that's not their money, they owe that to somebody else and they will continue to owe that to somebody else and if they are not available to repay it then their family will be held to account for that often. So we can just very simply create a kind of a bondage there, that wasn't there beforehand. (Frank, Study 2)

Conventional approaches of confiscating illegal items were identified as problematic. However, officers emphasized that few conceivable alternatives were available within current policing practice:

> I think the sensible idea would be that you don't take the drugs and you don't take the money. But that is not a realistic option is it? (Jean, Study 3)

As a result, officers were left operating within a contradictory, problematic drugs policing context that had the capacity to amplify the harms of the populations they were being encouraged to recognize as victims through iatrogenic practices.

Finally, emerging victim figures could also seemingly represent a source of tension within police forces. Officers described differing levels of awareness of issues of victimization between

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different teams. This was particularly noticeable in terms of '*disjointed working*' (Sally, Study 1) between specialist teams convened to deal with issues of exploitation in the context of the drugs trade and more generalist neighbourhood and response teams. Melissa (Study 1) described the conflicting approaches of the neighbourhood police team and specialist CCE team in her service area:

> We've locked up this person, this person was brought in from out of area, we know he's been brought in by a serious and organised criminal, he had a knife and he had some drugs, good job we've got him off the street. I'm sat there from the other side going actually why have we prosecuted him? Why haven't we put him through the NRM?[1]

Where the neighbourhood team took an approach driven by a need to prosecute knife and drug-related offences, as part of a unit focussing specifically on vulnerability and exploitation, Melissa's strategy and priority were quite different. On the other hand, where a team of officers did pursue victim-orientated strategies, this could generate tension between teams as well:

> I know that there will be kickback from the officers on the frontline who are quite rightly trying to deal with pressure from communities that there's drug dealing going on. (Sally, Study 1)

Officers also described these issues as playing out between the neighbourhood and response teams, with the possibility that response officers may not have the time and/or knowledge to identify potential cuckooing victims:

> Some of them will be really knowledgeable, they'll get it. But others will not really know or have time. They'll just be like "oh there's a drug user and his mate looks a bit weird. We'll just kick his mate out and that'll be it." And actually, well, when it comes to cuckooing that's not really what it's all about. (Eve, Study 3)

Due to differing priorities and resources, different teams within forces varied in the nature of their response to emerging drugs victims. This demonstrates how new policies that centre the figure of the drugs victim are filtered through officers who act as 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980), interpreting policy into practice, resulting in many tensions and complexities.

SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS TO THE 'PROBLEM' OF DRUGS VICTIMS

The previous section outlined several areas in which the emergence of drugs victims generates tensions for officers. The reconceptualization of individuals previously criminalized as perpetrators of drug-related crime as victims jarred with officers' pre-existing conceptualizations of the role of the police and threw into question well-established responses to drugs policing. Building on these issues, this final empirical section considers how officers attempted to address these areas of conflict, finding strategies for navigating the ontological insecurity created by the discovery of the victim in drugs policing.

One challenge associated with reconceptualizing offenders as victims was that it disrupted officer perceptions of the police role as targeting offenders. In light of this, they sought to define

1 The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a government-led framework for identifying potential victims of modern slavery.

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and focus on 'new' offenders in order to align with preconceptions of the offender-orientated nature of policing. Specifically, officers identified those responsible for creating the victims of drug-related crime—referring to those that sold drugs or exploited others in the process of selling drugs—as the 'true' offenders that they needed to pursue: '*they're victims and we've got to get to the real offenders*' (Michael, Study 1). This pursuit of the 'real offenders' allowed officers to find meaning and purpose in drug-related victim work that aligned with their understanding of the core police role:

> If we haven't got crimes to deal with then actually there's nothing for the police to fix. So if you can identify who's offending against these children and who's exploiting them then yeah you can arrest them and deal with it that way, but if you don't know who they are there is nothing you can do. (Michael, Study 1)

Officers stressed that those involved in the exploitation of PWUD, as well as drug supply, were responsible for a more serious level of harm that was therefore more worthy of police attention. References to high levels of risk and harm served to justify officers' focus on this particular group:

> We will do all that we possibly can to target those people that through their drug supply activities cause the greatest risks to people within this community. (Paul, Study 2)
>
> These are people whose lives are ruined and you are perpetuating that by supplying them with drugs. So for me there is an element in which like you are perpetuating some of the most serious harm in our society and you are causing a ripple effect that affects so many other areas of crime, so if you are going to do that, then you deserve to be punished. (John, Study 2)

A second-way officers sought to maintain their conventional role was through policing the boundaries of victim status. Distinguishing between 'genuine' and 'fake' victims, or 'rubbish' (Bowling *et al.* 2019: 175), as well as determining when offender status ought to take precedence, allowed a continued focus on identifying and addressing those who had transgressed the law. Officers were concerned with the possibility of the misuse of the label 'victim of exploitation' and that individuals might co-opt this label disingenuously. For example, officers described scrutinizing the misuse of the NRM:

> [The NRM] got slightly twisted and abused … What it's giving, then, is people this "get out" - especially those where you might have some that have chosen - either chosen to get involved in the supply of drugs or didn't necessarily choose to go in it but have stayed in it. (Michael, Study 1)

Additionally, officers were concerned with demarcating points where someone's offending could no longer be overlooked, despite experiences of victimization. These would typically be cases in which individuals were the perpetrators of serious levels of violence:

> If somebody has stabbed someone and it's a GBH then we're gonna prosecute them. Regardless of whether they're a victim or not. Because at that point they've committed a serious crime and it's appropriate to do so. (Melissa, Study 1)

Both of these activities provide officers with roles more akin to established ideas about the offender-focussed role of the police. This afforded ontological security within a changing context of victim-focussed drugs policing that could feel destabilizing.

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CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This article outlines three emergent categories of victim within the UK drugs policing field. These are people affected by: drug addiction, CCE and cuckooing. Our analysis provides a deeper understanding of these categories and how these victims are being recognized at the levels of policy and practice. This has implications for conceptualizations of victimhood. Although, as demonstrated by the tensions that arose in officers' work, the core normative elements of the concept remain intact, the emergence of new categories of drugs victims does begin to trouble victimhood's conceptual boundaries. Crucially, by calling for the repositioning of 'offenders' as 'victims', this development unsettles the rigidity of the victim–offender dichotomy, calling its utility into question, and thereby directing attention towards the value of more expansive and inclusive responses to drug use, for example those that focus on addressing social harm (Pemberton 2016). Furthermore, increased recognition of 'exploitation' and 'coercion' pushes for an expansion of who meets the expectations of 'blamelessness' that are integral to the recognition of victim status.

However, it is in considering the implications of these emergent victims for the work of police officers that the preceding analysis provides its deepest insights. Drugs policing remains morally charged and controversial, being symbolically representative of a range of complex social issues while simultaneously having significant material impacts on them (Coomber *et al.* 2019; Bacon and Spicer 2023). Within this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that the emergence of these types of victims appears disruptive and challenging for those working in this area. Underpinned by the wider policy environment and occupational culture, our analysis demonstrates how recognizing and responding to these 'new' victims can be at odds with officers' existing perceptions of their roles. Practically, it can clash with experiences of prior work in relation to drugs policing, while such engagement with 'deviant victims' (Dunn 2016) can sit uncomfortably with deep-rooted moral ideas of what policing is and perceptions of how the police 'ought' to respond to those labelled as 'victims' or 'offenders'.

These tensions have theoretical implications for how categories are used in the study of police culture. On the one hand, our findings demonstrate the utility and contemporary relevance of longstanding categorizations. Emergent drugs victims, such as those affected by CCE, can, for example, be conceptualized as 'disarmers' (Holdaway 1983) owing to their uncertain status. Those whom the police judge to be 'undeserving' victims (Charman 2020) might fall within the 'rubbish' category (Bowling *et al.* 2019). On the other hand, we identify changes in how people have traditionally been categorized and highlight the plasticity of police categorization practices. People who are dependent on drugs, for example, are not always and only viewed as 'police property', although their recognition as victims remains largely contingent on police perceptions of their conformity to the normative expectations associated with legitimate victim status. This stresses the need for researchers to interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions about police culture in the existing literature, avoid reductionist accounts and strive to capture nuance behind the cultural knowledge police officers deploy as they deal with the ambiguities and complexities of their occupational duties (Bacon 2022).

Understood through the lens of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980), our analysis identifies several ways that officers respond to the tensions described above. One is a reconfiguration of the drugs policing imaginary and social categorization of who the 'offenders' are. The emergence of these victim figures in drugs policing appears to involve the simultaneous 'altercasting' (Rock 2002: 16) of 'new' types of offender. To make practical and moral sense of their work, while attempting to maintain ontological security, officers represent and (re)produce drug offenders in different ways, highlighting aspects of their conduct and drawing attention to the risk of harm they pose, specifically in terms of various forms of exploitation of groups

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identified as vulnerable. This ontological project in consolidating a new type of offender as a focus of police work allows for new categories of drugs victims to emerge in a way that is less disruptive to perceptions of the role of the police. The potential consequences of these processes of 'alter-casting' are varied and far-reaching, and it is important to remain attentive to the implications of this dynamic, in particular for the reification of the victim–offender dichotomy.

Accordingly, while the three different categories of drugs victims are becoming increasingly recognized in policy and practice, significant challenges exist for the 'street-level' policing response to these individuals as victims. These challenges relate, in part, to officers' attempts to restrict access to victim status in order to maintain an understanding of their role that feels cohesive and familiar. The tensions surrounding processes of victim identification also raise the issue of who is excluded from victim status, and of risks of victim blaming and the insidious application of 'victim precipitation' (Tepper *et al.* 2006). While this article has focussed on officers' conceptualizations of emerging drugs market victims, as opposed to the practical and legal implications of being identified as such, it is worth noting that the latter varies significantly across the three categories and this, in addition to the extent to which processes of victim identification actually reduce harm, marks an important area for future research. Additionally, the facts that: individuals who experience harm in contexts of drug offending may reject or accept victim status (Marshall 2022*a*), may not always experience processes of victim identification as supportive (Marshall 2023), and likely see their experiences of victim recognition shaped by perceptions of their intersecting social identities all merit further investigation. Monitoring, challenging and informing the drugs policing response to these emergent victims will be essential.

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