



What do the public want from police?

Towards a minimum policing standard



Key points

- This study showed that there is considerable agreement among the public about what service police should provide and on the minimum standards to which police should adhere.
- People take a very process-based approach to questions about 'what the police are for' – i.e. they are less exercised about the outcomes police might achieve than the processes through which policing is conducted.
- People feel very strongly that, as a desired minimum, police should be responsive, fair and respectful, as well as engaged and 'present'.
- The public are clear on the distinctive need for police as a service to respond effectively in moments of danger, risk and uncertainty.

Summary

This project explored what the public want and expect from local policing.

Adapting a methodology inspired by the 'minimum income standard', the team engaged members of the public to develop a 'minimum policing standard'. This means an established consensus on a set of activities and services that the police should – under normal circumstances – be able to provide to everyone.

Participants identified police as essential first responders to a whole range of situations and were clear on the distinctive need for police to respond effectively in moments of danger, risk and uncertainty. Where this involves crime, police were seen as necessary to resolve the matter. However, participants also identified the need for appropriate third parties to step in, notably in relation to people with vulnerabilities.

Background

Relations between police and public are currently at a low ebb. Trust and confidence in the police have been falling for nearly a decade. The service has been beset by multiple scandals and problems, many of which are thought to impact on public opinion. This has sparked renewed policy and academic interest in questions of public trust and police legitimacy.

There are tensions in how the public view the police. When asked, people say police should prioritise crimes such as sexual offending and serious violence. However, the way they judge the police is based on how officers behave, particularly in relation to 'low-level' (i.e. common) crimes, disorder and other events in their communities, for example, anti-social behaviour.

At the same time, police are increasingly expected to deal with issues that are not crimes, such as homelessness and people in mental distress. This raises questions about what the police should be responsible for, where the boundaries of policing lie, and what kind of service should we expect the police to deliver.

With stretched public resources and increased demands, understanding how people judge police, and what they want from policing, is vital. Doing so can help to address declining trust in police, and reframe the role of the police in the light of contemporary challenges.

What we did

The team conducted three rounds of focus groups at locations across England: Leeds, Lancaster, Lichfield, and London.

Each focus group consisted of eight participants ranging from 18 to 75 years of age. The first round of focus groups began with discussions of participants' experiences of local- or community-specific policing. The participants identified what they considered to be 'good' or 'effective' local policing, and developed an agreed definition of local policing.

The second round of groups developed a list of core functions that the police should fulfil. This round also explored complex examples of how and when police should respond to local events or activities. These scenarios included a possible mental health episode, a domestic violence incident, and a vulnerable neighbouring family. The third round validated the findings from the previous rounds, and narrowed the set of core, 'non-negotiable' functions and activities to produce a final list of desired standards that the police should provide.



Key findings

From the focus groups, the team established four domains that represent people's expectations of their local police.

These were developed with minimal prompting from the researchers and came organically from the group discussions.

These domains were:

- police response
- police behaviour and treatment
- police presence & engagement
- crime priorities

The specific activities and behaviours within the first three domains are shown in the table (below). It became clear that the crime priorities category was less relevant to participants, who pushed back on ranking types of crimes. Instead they highlighted that all crime should be a priority (while also recognising that any crime which included violence, or risk of injury should be a top priority).

For non-crime incidents (e.g. anti-social behaviour or presentations of mental ill health), there was a broad consensus that an immediate police response was required when there was a potential threat to safety. This call to police service was based on the capacity of the police to use coercive force where necessary to control events and remove risk. This was coupled with an understanding that once risk has been eliminated, referral to other specialist services was needed.

When thinking about minimum standards for policing, participants took a strongly process-based stance: asked to come up with a list of things the police should simply be able to do, at least under normal circumstances, people focused primarily on how policing is conducted, and on the relationship between police and public. This focus on process was also evident in the definition of 'what is local policing and what does it do on a local level' drawn up by participants:

Local policing should consistently ensure the safety of the local community while ensuring fair treatment by:

- being available at any time
- being visible (including in-person or via phone)
- having good communication
- being contactable on a local level
- being respectful and empathetic
- building and establishing themselves as trustworthy.

They should uphold the law and respond to incidents in a proportionate and appropriate manner depending on the circumstances at hand. They should investigate and solve crimes, while providing adequate follow-up, crime prevention, and meaningful engagement to all peoples in the community.

Police Service Domains		
Response	Behaviour & Treatment	Presence & Engagement
Fast and proportionate response	Building trust	Greater community police presence (including on foot)
Focus on public safety	Treating the public with fairness and respect	Ability to speak directly to a person about local problems
Investigating and solving crimes	Building relationships within the community	Adequate follow-up in the aftermath of crimes
Openness and honesty when dealing with the public	Behaving in a professional manner	Responsive to the local community
Following up on crimes	Being role models of good behaviour	Physical local police station
Crime prevention and early intervention	Establish relationships with young people	Local community Police officer
Equal service across groups and places		Engaging in non-traditional types of communication with community

Next steps

Our findings reveal that the established ways in which police performance is measured is at odds with how the public think about the service that policing provides.

There is often an assumption that public trust will follow unproblematically when police (a) achieve effective outcomes tackling 'priority' crimes and (b) conduct successful internal reforms. However, measuring public views on crime priorities may be less valuable than asking people about what they really want from policing as a distinctive public service.

Doing so reveals that while crime is of course important, people are more focused on how policing is conducted and its relationships with the communities it serves. We need to develop better ways of understanding and measuring the process-based and relational values of responsive, fairness and respectful and engaged interactions that the public hold most dear.

To advance the project findings and explore its wider implications, a nationally representative survey was developed. The survey made use of the findings and insights from the deliberative focus groups and explored vignettes based on the scenarios outlined above. The survey of approximately 1,500 respondents was conducted between November and December 2023. A separate report outlines the summary findings from the National Survey research.



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For further information

Read more about our project "Towards a minimum policing standard" on our website:
vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/minimum-policing-standard

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