Vulnerability & Policing Futures
Research Centre

Service provision for vulnerable people in contact with policing: a strategic view from Bradford

Key points

- 'Vulnerability' provides a valuable but contested shared language for framing elements of local service provision that support people at risk of contact with the police.

- Severe cuts to public and third sector services and increasing levels of need make it difficult to implement holistic interventions that support vulnerable groups.

- Third sector organisations perform a vital role in providing services for vulnerable people in contact with the police. However, they remain marginal to strategic decision-making, oversight and coordination.

- In focusing service provision on vulnerability, unintended consequences can arise where differing expectations and understandings lead to interorganisational misunderstandings and conflict.

Summary

This place-based study mapped services used by vulnerable people in contact with the police across Bradford, through interviews with senior managers in public, private and third sector organisations.

It sought to understand the nature and make-up of service provider networks and their relations with vulnerable people who access services. It complements the Centre's data science programme which harnesses administrative datasets from public services through the Connected Bradford Research Database.

The project team found that 'vulnerability' as a shared language can potentially unite services. However, the focus on vulnerability can foster tensions and unintended consequences for organisations and people who use services. The extent to which services are involved in central service provision networks, funding constraints, and people's escalating complex needs also pose challenges to effective holistic service responses.

Background

Experiences of harm vary across different locations and social groups and often service responses remain fragmented, uneven and siloed. Protecting vulnerable groups cuts across the responsibilities and expertise of diverse organisations. While the evidence base regarding how services can work together locally to achieve these aims is growing, its implementation tends to be limited.

Literature review

Police responses to vulnerability-related calls for service that do not result in a crime being recorded (e.g., people in mental health crisis) is a contentious issue. Austerity and reduced service provision have left police officers with limited referral options in such situations. Initiatives, such as Right Care, Right Person, propose to reduce police attending non-crime related incidents. A challenge emerging from these debates is the police's response to and support for people who continue to be drawn to the attention of the police but may be considered vulnerable.

Individual service agendas, ways of working, funding structures and understandings of vulnerability can pose significant challenges to joined-up public health approaches. Current responses to vulnerable people in contact with police often focus on responding to crises rather than early intervention or prevention. Given the limitations of individual services, collaborative efforts to address these challenges are crucial.

Bradford shows a strong commitment to supporting its communities and recognises public health approaches as integral to this. Current work in Bradford, tracking the health and wellbeing of children and families throughout their lives (Born in Bradford Study), has afforded the linking of data from health, education, social care and environmental data to improve public health provisions and prevention efforts.

Nonetheless, the city faces continued challenges of high levels of deprivation and the highest rate of young people not in employment, education or training in West Yorkshire. With its committed practitioners and services, the city exemplifies progress in developing a whole-system public health response. In recognition of these attributes and resources, Bradford was selected as the Centre's first place-based project site, with a focus on identifying opportunities and challenges in promoting the trauma-informed whole systems service delivery to which West Yorkshire aspires.

What we did

The team interviewed 38 senior managers from public, third and private sector organisations across Bradford.

This included people from the local authority, police, health, education, along with drug and alcohol and housing services, and local businesses. The interviews were conducted between October 2022 and April 2024. The team analysed interviews using thematic analysis to identify relevant themes. They were able to identify an overview of strategy, networked responses, and service provision in relation to people who are vulnerable and in contact with the police.

Key findings

Senior managers spoke about how the focus on vulnerability has enabled discussions between police and partners about people whose needs transcend organisational boundaries. Nonetheless, the team found that challenges to collaborative working remain. These challenges impact on early intervention, prevention and effective support mechanisms.

Vulnerability as shared language

Senior managers highlighted a shift in services, notably the police, being more aware of and responsive to vulnerabilities among people they encounter, i.e., making referrals to relevant support services, and collaborating to respond to complex needs. This has enhanced partnerships, increased the number of services sharing office space and the number of joined-up interventions

> " We started doing a bit of work […] in a church in the centre of Bradford […]. Basically, they were running drop-in events for people who live street-based lives who are vulnerable due to multiple overlapping vulnerabilities.
>
> Police Senior Manager

The focus on vulnerability as a shared language supported honest discussions about local needs and 'what works', challenging traditional service approaches and improving responses.

Unintended consequences

Yet, the 'vulnerability response' of police, local authority and third sector partners has fostered negative perceptions between organisations. There are particularly challenging perceptions of statutory mental health and social care services due to their limited capacity and response to problems considered to be within their remit. Equally, there are concerns that an over-emphasis on vulnerability, in the context of policing, minimises the role of individuals' agency and accountability.

Public sector capacity and unmet need

Austerity has reduced public sector capacity and service provision, which has been compounded by Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, significantly increasing individual and community vulnerabilities. This growth in demand for services has affected service prioritisation and response models. As a result, services are focused on responding to crises rather than preventative interventions.

Third sector involvement

A lack of available statutory service provision has left third-sector organisations burdened with supporting vulnerable individuals, who often trust and engage with these organisations more. Yet, many third sector services operate on the periphery of centralised statutory service networks and feel actively excluded. Others choose to stay out of such networks to retain their relationship with local communities as independent trustworthy services.

Private sector involvement

The private sector was identified as a largely untapped resource in responding to vulnerable people in contact with the police. However, an overriding focus on profit rather than the public good means that while the sector sometimes complements the work of public and third sector agencies, other times it does not. Indeed, occasionally it creates its own vulnerabilities that require multi-agency responses.

> " I don't look at it in terms of vulnerability to Joe Public, I'm talking about vulnerabilities [i.e. human trafficking] within the [private] industry that we regulate here. I see that is a fairly common theme in Bradford.
>
> Senior Manager from Private Sector Regulator

Many services respond to vulnerable people in contact with the police while being outside of coordinated response networks. This complicates the integration of services, the understanding of need across the city, and how to identify ways to develop place-based holistic responses.

Next steps

Findings so far highlight learning for academics and practitioners in thinking about further improving service provision for vulnerable groups:

1. Further mapping and use of available resources and capabilities beyond statutory provisions can help draw upon and mobilise community assets to address the increasing number of individuals in need.

2. Prioritising sustainable and continuously staffed liaison roles between police and other services can increase dialogue and collaboration, helping to address local vulnerabilities earlier.

3. Many vulnerable people lack trust in statutory services. Closer working relationships between statutory, third and private sector organisations, focusing on joint outreach activities, can help to (re)build trust. While such an approach may initially be met with hostility, consistency with sustained partnership investment has delivered promising outcomes.

4. Outreach models work best where services are co-located and/or jointly tasked. Providing dedicated spaces where services can share honest feedback and focus on actions allows information sharing, multi-agency operational support, service efficiency and co-ordinated provision benefits.

5. Harnessing the roles, responsibilities and resources of diverse actors, agencies and communities affords proactive and holistic responses to vulnerability that draws upon local knowledge, capacities and capabilities to effect change.

As next steps, the research team will undertake neighbourhood and problem-based case studies to complement the strategic level analysis. These will provide more detailed, frontline perspectives of the interactions between vulnerability and policing. Neighbourhood attributes, conditions and resources significantly shape need, service provision and trajectories across time. By combining insights from strategic level perspectives with bottom-up experiences, from frontline practitioners and people who access services, the team can better understand how language, strategies and priorities are realised.

The research team will continue to work closely with Centre data scientists to explore how routinely collected public service data can advance understandings of local services and individuals' journeys through them.

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For further information

Read more about this project at
vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/bradford-mapping

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