**Vulnerability &
Policing Futures**
Research Centre

Viewpoints on vulnerability as a focus for policing and public services

Calling someone vulnerable is offensive

The Police should stop acting like social workers

The police have gone too soft in recent years

Arresting people can sometimes help them

Vulnerability is a meaningless term

It's a routine practice for the Police to abuse vulnerable people

Key points

- Vulnerability is often used as a focus for policing and public service responses to situations of harm. Amongst service providers and people who access services, views about the value of vulnerability for this purpose cluster into one of three viewpoints:

- Viewpoint 1 strongly endorses a vulnerability focus for police and public services to deliver improved outcomes in situations of harm.

- Viewpoint 2 is sceptical of police and public services' ability to address vulnerabilities, underscoring distrust of authorities and institutional failings.

- Viewpoint 3 is also sceptical of the police and public services' capacity to support vulnerable people, emphasising inadequate resourcing, the vulnerability of police officers and the need to prioritise crime-fighting duties.

Summary

This project explored differing viewpoints on the role and value of vulnerability as an organising focus around which public services and police address situations of harm.

The research adopted Q methodology as a technique for studying people's opinions, values, and beliefs. Participants sorted a range of statements depending on the extent to which they agree or disagree with each. The research team gathered and analysed views on the operationalisation of vulnerability from police officers, public service providers, and service users.

There were points of consensus and disagreement about the ability of the police and other services to support people who might be considered 'vulnerable' and how the increasing focus on vulnerability has shaped service delivery.

Background

After a period of sustained austerity, police are increasingly called upon to respond to complex social problems and interact with vulnerable people, often in collaboration with other services.

Although the concept of vulnerability is widely used in social and public policy, it remains ambiguous. It is not always clear that people and organisations have a shared understanding when discussing and using the term 'vulnerability'. While a focus on vulnerability has the potential to enhance policy and practice, this can also carry risks of further entrenching institutional shortcomings and so needs careful consideration.

The study sought to uncover shared viewpoints on the role and value of vulnerability as a focus for policing and public service responses to situations of harm. By capturing diverse viewpoints from police, partner service providers and people who access services, the team aimed to identify key areas of consensus and disagreements that might help inform more effective interventions and inter-agency collaboration.

What we did

Q methodology is a mixed method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques.

Participants are presented with a range of statements (e.g. we should all be treated as vulnerable) representing differing views, which they rank based on their level of agreement or disagreement. To compile the 44 statements in this study, the team conducted a scoping review of three research databases, including 1,570 academic and grey literature and media sources. Participants were recruited to undertake the sorting activity (called the 'Q-Sort'), where they ranked each statement across a predetermined grid ranging from 'most disagree' to 'most agree'. Following this, each participant was interviewed to explore reasoning for their selections and wider views.

The fieldwork was conducted in Bradford, a northern English city with a rich history and culturally diverse population, as well as some of the highest levels of deprivation. The sample included 18 frontline police officers and 18 service providers from sectors including housing, health, education, community organisations and drug services. Additionally, 25 members of the public with experiences of accessing local services participated in the study. Many of these participants had direct interactions with the police. They are collectively referred to here as 'service users'.

The demographic breakdown of the participants involved in the study and how they correspond to particular viewpoints is detailed in the table below.

Viewpoint	Viewpoint 1 (n=29)	Viewpoint 2 (n=14)	Viewpoint 3 (n=14)
Service users	28% (8)	79% (11)	21% (3)
Service providers (non-Police)	48% (14)	21% (3)	7% (1)
Police	24% (7)	0% (0)	71% (10)
Average age	41 years	31 years	37 years
Women	48% (14)	71% (10)	71% (10)
Racially minoritised	31% (9)	50% (7)	14% (2)
Not working full-time	28% (8)	57% (8)	25% (3)
Disability	10% (3)	21% (3)	0% (0)

Key findings

The study revealed three distinct clusters of shared viewpoints among participants. It also found consensus across the viewpoints that vulnerability is a meaningful and useful concept, but that vulnerable people often do not see themselves as vulnerable.

Viewpoint 1

Viewpoint 1 strongly endorsed a vulnerability focus for police and public services to help them collaborate in responding to situations of harm. It valued the police performing a dual role of supporting vulnerable people and fulfilling their traditional crime-fighting duties, highlighting their importance as first responders with necessary powers available to them. An attentive attitude towards vulnerability was viewed as a pathway to better outcomes, allowing police and partner services to prioritise support for vulnerable people and share information carefully, addressing trust issues with public services. This viewpoint underscored the complexities of individual responsibility and advocated a holistic approach to addressing harm through the lens of vulnerability. It emphasised the importance of considering the vulnerabilities of people suspected of committing crime. Overall, this perspective saw a vulnerability-focused approach as essential for more effectively addressing the needs of the most vulnerable in society.

In contrast to Viewpoint 1, the other two perspectives were more sceptical about the feasibility, desirability and benefits that might derive from focusing on vulnerability, albeit drawing on different values and beliefs.

> " … we should be focusing on people with vulnerability, there is people in the community that are more vulnerable than others… it's right that we focus more time on them."
>
> (Police, male, 37 years, White British)

Viewpoint 2

Viewpoint 2 emphasises vulnerability as a significant and meaningful concept that intersects with systemic issues such as poverty, inequality and institutional racism. It reflects scepticism about the police's current effectiveness in supporting vulnerable populations. It highlighted concerns about privacy and excessive information sharing, and the need for collaborative and accountable policing.

The viewpoint underscored a significant trust deficit between vulnerable individuals and public services, acknowledging that institutional failings impact the protection and support provided to vulnerable people.

> " Unless they are causing a problem, nobody cares… if they're just slowly committing suicide inside their house, who's going to know. There's no services going out to find this person."
>
> (Service user, female, 57 years, White and Asian British)

Viewpoint 3

Viewpoint 3 strongly advocates for the police to focus on traditional law enforcement roles rather than social work. It sees gaps in public service provision as a significant issue for vulnerable individuals. The perspective emphasises individuals' personal responsibilities and contends that the police have become too lenient. It believes that systemic failures often stem from resource limitations, and holds that the police generally treat individuals fairly, irrespective of race or ethnicity. Additionally, it contends that the police face significant dangers, highlighting the need to maintain a crime-fighting focus in policing.

> " I think [the police are] massively vulnerable to the dangers… you've got pretty terrible people out there."
>
> (Service provider, female, 44 years, White British)

Details of participants

Viewpoint 1 was the perspective held by the largest number of participants (29), whereas both other viewpoints were shared by 14 participants. Despite differences between the three groups in terms of professional status and personal relation to public services, as the table shows, service users, police and other service providers were represented among all three viewpoints. The exception to this was that no police officers were represented within Viewpoint 2. Additionally, only one non-police service provider was represented within Viewpoint 3.

Consensus statements

While the findings reveal clear areas of difference in values, beliefs and understandings around the role and value of vulnerability, there were also areas of consensus across the three viewpoints. Our study revealed six consensus statements, with two highly correlated. There was **strong agreement** that: 'Vulnerable people often don't see themselves as vulnerable'. And there was **strong disagreement** that: 'Calling someone vulnerable is offensive'.

This consensus suggests that there are considerable unmet needs regarding vulnerabilities and there need to be more inclusive communication strategies to ensure that people deemed vulnerable recognise their eligibility for additional support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings illustrate strongly held views about whether police and other services succeed in supporting 'vulnerable' people, and what the role of the police and partner agencies should be in this work. The study highlights both the opportunities and challenges in vulnerability as an organising focus around which public services and police address situations of harm. On the one hand, there seems to be considerable support amongst some for a coordinated multi-agency understanding of and response to people's experiences of vulnerability, with acknowledgment that police can and should adopt a dual role of crime-fighting and supporting vulnerable people given their position as first responders and the powers available to them. According to this view, prioritising support for vulnerable people and information sharing between the police and public services can foster better outcomes.

On the other hand, however, amongst others there were significant concerns about trust in public services, the dangers of information sharing, negative experiences with the police, inadequate resourcing and institutional racism. All of these were seen as significant barriers to the operationalisation and public reception of vulnerability as a focus of public service delivery in this field. Other sceptical views feared that the police have become overly lenient, highlighting the need for a crime-fighting focused approach to policing. There were also deeply held concerns that unmet need, limited resources and systemic failures undermine the capacity for police and public services to adequately support people experiencing vulnerabilities.

Next steps

The research team will produce a resource that outlines in greater detail the methods and data collection processes used in this study and the factor analysis undertaken.

The team will also reflect on the benefits and challenges of using Q methodology in the study of vulnerability and policing.

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For further information

Read more about this project at
vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/q-methods

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