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# What service should police provide? Towards a minimum policing standard

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**ABSTRACT**

Police in England and Wales are under growing pressure to respond to multiple demands, with budgets and capabilities failing to keep pace. Alongside this, public scandals and wrongdoing are regularly revealed, debated and fed into reform programmes. Recognising these issues, we ask what members of the public really want from policing. Inspired by research on the Minimum Income Standard, this study aims to establish consensus on a set of activities and services that the police should be able to provide to everyone – a 'minimum policing standard'. Three iterative rounds of focus groups conducted in four UK locations revealed broad agreement on the importance of responding to local problems, neighbourhood police presence and engagement and fair treatment, all of which were observed to be currently lacking. Generic crime priority lists were not seen to be useful for thinking about how police should respond to and protect communities. While participants emphasised the need for police to 'pass things on' to services better placed to provide solutions to problems such as drug misuse or homelessness, there was general agreement that an initial police response is necessary where risk of harm presents. Nonetheless, a widely shared view that the police should not be involved beyond first response in cases of threat to safety where no crime has been committed indicated a perceived boundary for police intervention. In conclusion, our research reveals considerable social consensus on what service police should provide and the minimum standards to which a police service should adhere.

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Police; public opinion; police-community relations; deliberative methods

## Introduction

Police in England and Wales are now, like their counterparts in many other jurisdictions, engaged in a process of almost constant change. Forces are scrambling to keep up with new and rapidly emerging crime types, due most obviously to the ongoing revolution in information and communications technology. Social, political and economic pressures on social order, stemming from a wide range of sources, are growing. As with other public services, police budgets and capabilities have not kept pace with a growing population and increasingly entrenched deprivation and need; but unlike other public services, police are still expected to intervene as a last resort when other agencies are absent or incapacitated. Alongside all this, multidimensional failure, malpractice and wrongdoing

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in policing is regularly revealed, debated, and fed into reform programmes of various forms, sizes and chances of success.

Yet, throughout the 'permacrisis' that afflicts British policing (Bradford *et al.* 2024) some things remain more or less constant. Illustrated by persistent recourse to Peel's apocryphal principles, police, their political masters, and the penumbra of agencies that sit around them remain rhetorically wedded to a set of core underlying values. That police should 'fight crime' by, preferably, prevention; that the success of policing is measured by the absence of crime and disorder; and that public trust and confidence is central to policing in a democratic state.

Consider, for example, the Evidence-Based Policing (EBP) 'movement' (Sherman 1998, 2015, Fyfe 2017). EBP is often described using almost revolutionary terms, as if it represents a radical break with prior modes of policing. Yet, Lum and Koper (2017) define an evidence-based policing organisation as one that: prioritises proactive, problem-oriented policing of crime hotspots; supports multi-agency problem-solving approaches; focuses on due process and procedural justice; assesses and evaluates tactics and strategies; and uses research and evidence for policy development, in training, and in professional development. In other words, despite the addition of 'evidence-based', and the context outlined above, a strikingly familiar vision of policing persists. It remains decidedly about the investigation and prevention of crime, and it should be conducted in ways that are not merely lawful, but which maintain positive relations with the policed.

However, there is an under-discussed tension within EBP and wider current debates. While the rhetorical focus on crime-fighting, prevention, order maintenance *and* public trust persists, it is often the first two of these that appears to be of most interest to police and policymakers. There is an increasingly technocratic turn in policing, informed by EBP and associated efforts, which proposes: (a) that armed with the 'scientific' evidence, police have (or at least should have) special knowledge of crime and related issues, which (b) means they are (or at least should be) most appropriately placed to decide what is best to do in relation to these problems, and (c) 'what the public wants' is for police to get on and deal with them. In other words, there is an assumption that public trust will flow unproblematically from policing that is 'done right', where the right thing to do can be identified by police managers through interrogation of the prevailing scientific evidence and specialist knowledge they command. EBP constructs 'evidence' as a hierarchy, which position randomised controlled trials (RCTs) at the apex and ranks all other forms of knowledge below this. Hence, where 'what the public wants' – people's experiences and expectations – contradicts the 'science', the public is assumed to be ill-informed, at best, and at worse irrelevant. In large part, this follows from a focus in EBP on what the police deliver – namely, the intervention – and fails to pay significant regard to contextual and implementation moderators including the ways in which interventions are shaped by the environments in which they are immersed, their reception by the public and people's willingness to work with or at least accept them.

To be clear, there may be good arguments for evidence-led, police-centred prioritisation. Recall, for example, that many high-harm crimes have shifted (further) into hidden, often online spaces (Caneppele and Aebi 2019). Sexual exploitation of women and children, modern slavery, 'county-lines' drug-dealing and complex fraud offences all require innovative, evidenced-based solutions from police and partner agencies, and significant resources. Police (and partner agencies) may well be best placed to decide on what to do in such cases. But the tension nevertheless persists. Moreover, questions concerning the effective use of resources and indeed cutting costs (or at the very least, targeting resources) loom large in current debates. This inevitably means choices about what gets done and what does not, and EBP equally inevitably means making decisions on what police do, where, when and to whom.

The fundamental epistemological questions in EBP about what counts as 'evidence' devalues the credibility of lay voices as 'competent knowers' of policing, and yet members of the public continue to determine, shape and/or influence policing, the ways it is done and the outcomes it delivers across many different fronts. This is also true in the healthcare context where the credibility of 'patients' and people with illness as knowers about their illness is similarly side-lined by Evidence-Based Medicine

(EBM) (Bensing *et al*. 2013). As Cowan and Cartwright (2019, p. 55) point out, EBM is about the relationship between practitioners and government (and the public interest), as well as the relationship between doctor and patient. In both EBM and EBP what from a lay perspective might be considered the core institutional relationship – between doctor and patient, police and public – moves, rhetorically and substantively, from being the central consideration to one among many. In other words, the Evidence Based movement(s) make clear that other actors, and other factors, shape and perhaps determine institutional practice. Policing is not so much about 'serving the public' as addressing a set of goals determined by those with inside and specialist knowledge, the achievement of which is *assumed* to serve the public.

Whether it is warranted or not, an intensively crime-focussed, technocratic turn in policing presents risks to police-public relations. The paradigmatic example here is the question of officer (or at least some form of police) attendance at burglaries. From an EBP perspective this can look like a waste of time and resources. Sending police officers or staff to burgled properties often brings little investigative or preventative benefit. Yet, from the perspective of the public, such attendance often seems central to the role of police, and to the state's duty to protect its citizens. The shifting debate on police attendance at burglaries, which in recent years has moved from high-level pressure to not attend unless strictly necessary to a commitment to attend all such crime scenes (NPCC 2023), reflects the political and normative tensions that underlie police decision-making in these types of areas, and what can happen if police and public perspectives diverge too far.

In short, as police increasingly shift towards 'evidence-based', 'relentlessly data-driven' (Metropolitan Police Service 2022) and indeed harm-focussed modalities, there is a danger of a growing gap between what police and public think the institution is 'for'; what they want from it and what they want it to achieve. In this paper, we consider the lay response to these questions. We do so by adopting and adapting the terminology and methodology of the Minimum Income Standard (Davis *et al*. 2015), a long running effort to probe what people think should be the minimum standard of living for people in the UK. By establishing a baseline of desired or expected service delivery for policing, we are able flesh out the remit of police: what people think policing is for, how it should be delivered, and what are its limits. As should be clear, we are conflating the 'police' with 'policing' here – we show below that people take in fact a more nuanced view on how 'policing services' should be delivered.

In many ways, this paper builds upon insights from earlier British policing scholarship that sought to outline the parameters of 'minimal policing' (Kinsey *et al*. 1986, Reiner 2012) and highlighted the interconnectedness of fairness, public trust and effectiveness in the flow of public information on which policing depends. It seeks to advance what Bowling (2007) referred to as 'good enough policing' that seeks to ensure acceptable minimum standards in the provision of policing as a 'public good' (Loader and Walker 2001). From here, the discussion proceeds as follows. First, we consider the methods and limits of traditional approaches to understanding public wants and desires in relation to the service police should provide – notably through the prioritisation of activities. We then go on to explain and justify the approach adopted in this study, the methods deployed and the data collected. We outline the key findings under four broad themes: police response; police behaviour; police presence and engagement; and crime priorities. We then present insights from public views of police involvement with vulnerable people and a consensus definition of local policing. We conclude with a discussion about the implications of our findings for thinking about and studying public understandings of what role and service the police should play in modern Britain through the lens of a minimum policing standard.

## Prioritisation vs. a 'vision' of policing

> So, what are the police for? What is the value we are trying to create in policing? What is the purpose of a police force? The activities it carries out are not an end in themselves but a means to an end. But what end? Is the purpose to patrol the streets? Is it to reduce crime? Or is it to make people feel safer?
> *Sara Thornton, former Chair, National Police Chiefs Council* (NPCC 2015, 2023)

Answers to the questions posed above are considered surprisingly infrequently, at least in relation to understanding where there may be consensus among different publics on what they want from police. When such questions are asked, discussion tends to revolve around priorities and priority setting – on what, given scarce resources, should police concentrate, and what can, or should, they do less of? Some recent studies, for example, have used 'Q' methodology, asking members of the public and police and other professionals to sort through and rank different policing priorities, from tackling serious sexual violence to dealing with parking violations (Vo *et al*. 2017, Higgins 2019). One underlying motivation for such research is the idea that a significant divergence between what people think police should concentrate on and what they are actually doing may undermine perceptions of the economic and social value of police work, and of the moral and ethical values that underpin it, and thus present challenges to public trust and police legitimacy.

These are important issues, not least for reasons of democratic accountability and public value. However, such exercises have a number of limitations. These include, first, that the results of reflective priority-setting exercises, which perhaps unsurprisingly tend to find that people prioritise more serious crimes and harms, seem to clash with the 'revealed preferences' of the public. The types of events and behaviours that police organisations get lots of communication about (College of Policing 2015, Duncan 2022) and the criteria we know people use to judge police activity do not map neatly onto the guidelines for policing that priority-setting exercises seem to reveal. Instead, it is mundane interpersonal interaction and low-level disorder that often seem most important in people's assessment of 'success' and 'value' in policing (Jackson and Bradford 2009, Jackson *et al*. 2013). People may say they want police to prioritise high harm and often hidden crimes such as sexual violence, but they seem to judge police on the prevalence of low-level disorder in their neighbourhood and the way they recall officers interacted with them at during a traffic stop or at a football match (or, naturally, in more serious circumstances).

Second, the fact that people tend to prioritise more serious crimes and harms may tell us little more than that they think those things are, indeed, serious, and that when they occur the police should expend time and resource on addressing them. What they think about the calibration of everyday police activity, which tends to revolve around less serious crimes and harms, or involves preventative, guardianship or monitoring activity, is left unclear.

Third, exercises in priority setting may not pay sufficient attention to where people draw the line. What is properly the responsibility of the police and what is not? What are the boundaries of policing (Trinkner *et al*. 2018), and what is the 'service' police are meant to deliver? Is everything on an ordered list of priorities something that police should ideally be attempting, or are some activities 'nice to do but not essential' while others, perhaps toward the bottom of such lists, things that police should actively avoid? Austerity cuts to statutory services over the past decade have added to the responsibilities of the police, often in a piecemeal, indeed unconsidered, fashion (Solar and Smith 2022). The question of whether people will support or accept police not doing some of these things, or stop doing other things to compensate, is rarely considered (the Right Person, Right Care philosophy may mark the first genuine attempt to raise this question strategically, albeit wrapped up in a logic of demand management rather than ethical values).

Finally, studies of prioritisation concentrate on the public value that can be produced by police work, i.e. the specific types of things that police organisations can do that align with what the public value and/or can add in some way to the quality of the public sphere. On these accounts, police activity contributes to the public good by providing security and protection from particular threats, justice in the aftermath of a crime, and so on. Yet, viewed from another perspective the police as an institution is, or at least should be, a public good (Loader and Walker 2001, Meares 2018). The set of activities that police undertake, that is, *collectively* provide value and a contribution to the welfare of society. While there are a host of caveats around the edges of such claims (for example resource constraints will inevitably limit the provision of services, such that some people will inevitably receive less because others are receiving more), policing in a country such as the UK appears to meet the basic definitions of non-rivalry and non-exclusion that establish it as a

(potential) public good. Person A's 'consumption' of police services does not exclude Person B from also consuming them, while the former cannot prevent the latter from accessing those same services. Yet, the uneven distribution of policing, and 'security' more broadly, suggests that it is 'captured' by certain people more than others, failing the non-exclusionary test. Neighbourhood Watch, as Hope (2001) argued, is a good example of policing as a 'club good' rather than public good. Policing ultimately is driven by demand; and demand and need are fundamentally differently distributed both socially and spatially, with some people better able to, and more likely to, assert demands. Nonetheless, as Loader and Walker (2001, p. 26) argue, policing is also a collective good in a deeper sense, being irreducibly social in nature, the product of a dense web of social relations that involves not just 'the police' and 'the public' but a wide set of other institutions, agencies and actors. It is the relationship between all these entities that constitutes the 'goods' of policing.

Prioritisation exercises may therefore miss the wood for the trees – by concentrating on specific things police may or may not do, they miss what, as a whole, this institution can contribute to the public good, both in its own right and through the network of ties it maintains with other agencies and actors. Prioritisation also assumes that the basic underlying question – what are the police for? – is widely known and settled. This may not actually be the case; or, at least, there might be disagreements about the margins and limits of police-work that go beyond whether a particular crime type warrants more or less attention. Moreover, prioritisation exercises occlude questions of the public good, at least in as much as these are framed in terms of what everyone should be able to expect from police. Not least because, as with EBP, the implicit or explicit emphasis is on diverting resource towards particular crimes or behaviours and therefore, inevitably, away from others.

In this paper, we aim to explore exactly these issues. Most fundamentally, we ask is it possible to identify consensus on a set of activities and services that police should simply be able to provide to everyone, at least under normal conditions? In answering this question, we will inevitably need to address others: are there current police activities that should halt, or be passed on to more suitable agencies; is there a subset of activities that are deemed to be 'ideal but not essential'; and what are the appropriate boundaries or limits of police work?

## A minimum policing standard?

Our inspiration for this research is the on-going production of the 'Minimum Income Standard' (MIS) by a team from Loughborough University[1] and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.[2] Since 2008, the MIS has provided detailed information about what members of the UK public agree households need not just to survive, but to live with dignity. 'The Minimum Income Standard (MIS) presents a vision of the living standards that we, as a society, consider everyone in the UK should be able to achieve' (Padley and Stone 2023, p. 1). The MIS uses an iterative focus group methodology to derive an understanding of what people think are the 'basics' of a good life in the UK at the current point in time – the set of material and other amenities everyone should have access to, and therefore be able to afford to purchase (Davis *et al*. 2015). This includes, for example, the food people should be able to afford, which is currently defined (for adults) as: cereal and/or toast for breakfast; a mid-morning tea or coffee and a biscuit; a light lunch (e.g. a sandwich and a piece of fruit); and a more substantial evening meal (e.g. home-made spaghetti bolognaise with a side salad, followed by tinned fruit and custard). The MIS then costs the total set of goods and services defined by the method to derive the total weekly budgets required to meet the standard, which in April 2023 were, for example, £440.59 for a single working age adult, £527.62 for a pensioner couple, £898.31 for a lone parent with two children, one aged 2–4 and one of primary school age, and £1,020.40 for a couple with two children aged 2–4 and primary school age (Padley and Stone 2023, p. 5).

We limit ourselves to the first part of the MIS process, not least because costing police activity is notoriously difficult, particularly across the whole range of activities undertaken. We also limit

ourselves to 'neighbourhood policing', broadly defined; to the types and forms of policing that take place in and are in a sense tied to people's neighbourhoods and their everyday lives. This includes the policing of crimes such as domestic violence, on the one hand, and online fraud, on the other, since both clearly happen to 'ordinary' people in 'ordinary' places. However, 'high' policing (Brodeur 2010) directed towards terrorism and other state-level threats is largely out of scope, both because people tend to be very unfamiliar with it and because we expect near 100% agreement that police should have the capability to address terrorist threats and protect state institutions. For similar reasons, we spend little time considering the police response to crimes such as murder and rape. Again, we assume that people are in broad agreement that police should have the resources to deal with such events.

There is a risk that the Minimum Policing Standard (MiPoS) could become a large and indeed expansive list. Some, even many, groups of people may be willing and even eager to insert police into a wide range of social and other situations. This would present challenges; most obviously, could available resources meet such expectations? Perhaps more profoundly, what is the ethically or morally appropriate response to public voices calling for ever more policing, bearing in mind that such policing is likely to be disproportionately directed towards marginalised groups with less or no say in processes that determine it. The 'wide but shallow' vision of security (Loader 2006) indicated by an expansive set of duties might ultimately militate against those forms of policing best able to provide meaningful security to all.

That much policing is disproportionately directed towards marginalised groups also raises questions about the ways in which problems are conceptualised: those framed from a security perspective become ipso facto police problems. Only when problems are framed as (for example) poverty, homelessness, addiction, mental ill-health or neurodiversity do they take on a different register. We designed the study reported here in such a way as to allow such issues to 'surface'. We tried hard to avoid simply assuming police should or should not deal with a particular issue, and we did not direct participants towards specific police powers, policies or directives but rather asked to think about what police could and should do for them and their community.

## *Aims and research questions*

Exploring what people want from local policing, this study aims to develop a minimum policing standard, a broad social consensus on a set of activities, services and interventions that people think the police should, under normal conditions, be able to provide to everyone in their community. The research also asks whether people think there are current police activities that should cease and be passed on to more suitable agencies, and where the appropriate boundaries or limits of police work may lie.

## *Methodology*

The process of developing a MiPoS was based directly on that used to develop the MIS process (Padley and Stone 2023). Our priority was to conduct a series of iterative rounds of deliberative focus groups in different locations across England. These were intended progressively to establish a clear understanding of what the public considers to be minimum standards for the police, and to identify points of consensus in relation to this question between diverse publics.

## *Design*

As with the MIS, three rounds of focus groups were used, with four groups at each round. Groups were selected from four different areas of England to provide a degree of sample diversity. The target areas were:

- Residents of London who had had recent contact with the police. This criterion was intended to ensure that the sample included a significant number of participants with direct recent experience of interactions with the police.
- People living in a different large metropolitan city of over half a million residents beyond the capital, for which Leeds was selected.
- People living in a smaller (under 200,000 population) urban area and its environs. Lancaster was chosen for this purpose.
- People living in rural areas in the vicinity of Lichfield in Staffordshire.

### *Participants*

Eight participants were recruited for each of the 12 focus groups (with a total target of 96). There were three dropouts on the day, leaving a total sample of 93 participants. Recruitment was conducted by Market Research For Greater Results (MRFGR). MRFGR is a UK-based market research agency that among other things assists in creating and hosting focus groups. The company adheres to the Market Research Society code of conduct. We used MRFGR to recruit participants and locate venues, but the focus groups themselves were managed solely by us. MRFGR also conducted initial screening of participants. Participants were aged between 18 and 75, with 50 females and 42 males. (See Table 1 for sample demographic breakdown). Persons or persons with family members who had worked in marketing, criminal justice or community safety were excluded from participating.

### *Focus groups*

Focus groups followed an iterative path, with each stage built upon the former as a process of consensus building through reflection and checking back. The aim of Round 1 (R1) was to explore participants' understandings and experiences of their local 'neighbourhood policing' and generate a working definition of 'the police role' in this context. In Round 2 (R2), participants were presented with this definition and asked to generate the set of activities, services and interventions they thought the police should be able to provide to everyone in their community. For Round 3 (R3), participants were asked to reflect on the outcomes of the previous rounds, and to make changes and

**Table 1.** Focus group participant demographics.

| Total # of Participants (All Rounds) | 93 |
|---|---|
| ***Total # of Participant Dropouts (All Rounds)*** | 3 |
| ***Gender*** | **Total** |
| Male | 42 |
| Female | 50 |
| NA | 1 |
| ***Age Range*** | **Total** |
| 18–19 | 1 |
| 20–29 | 8 |
| 30–39 | 30 |
| 40–49 | 22 |
| 50–59 | 8 |
| 60–69 | 17 |
| 70–79 | 7 |
| ***Ethnicity*** | **Total** |
| White | 71 |
| Black/African/Caribbean/Black British | 12 |
| Asian/Asian British: Indian | 4 |
| Mixed | 4 |
| Asian/Asian British: Pakistani | 1 |
| Filipino | 1 |

amendments. Additionally, R3 participants were presented with four hypothetical scenarios to consider under what circumstances they felt a call to emergency service and a police response was necessary in incidents involving potentially vulnerable people. The purpose of this was to explore where members of the public draw the line for a police response. There were four scenarios, which concerned the following:

- An unruly male making a commotion on your street
- A single mother with children who become increasingly endangered
- A domestic argument with a child in the dwelling
- A group of young males who cause disturbances within the neighbourhood

Each scenario presented to participants included a number of escalations, with participants being asked to determine if and/or when they would call the police or other services.

In R2 and R3, participants were provided with workbooks in which to anonymously answer questions posed and make comments, before questions were discussed openly among the group. For all focus groups, discussions were recorded, and discussion points were also recorded on a Miro board. Participants could observe the Miro and interact with discussion points throughout the session. Recordings were transcribed and then thematically analysed by two researchers.

### *Analysis*

Following each iteration of focus groups, in the tradition of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), we analysed material generated from the Miro white board, participants' workbooks, and session transcriptions to identify thematic domains within local policing that participants identified as being important. Analysis was conducted following each round of focus groups, informing the subsequent series of groups, enabling researchers to modify and adjust the format to ensure the research goals were met.

## Results

Four domains relating to requirements for local policing emerged from the focus group discussions. These were: (1) Police Response, (2) Police Behaviour, (3) Police Presence & Engagement, and (4) Crime Priorities. Discussions indicated a list of key elements within each domain (see Table 2). It is important to note that researchers did not impose these categories on participants, rather they emerged from group discussions, with minimal prompting. These categories represented four main areas identified by participants as being of high importance to themselves and their local communities.

**Table 2.** Showing domains and elements of standard local police service requirements emerging from public focus group discussions.

| 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 and local problems | 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 | Establishing relationships with young people | Local community police officer |
| Equal service across groups and places | | Engaging in non-traditional types of communication |

## Emergent domains

### Police response

Analysis of initial discussions revealed seven elements of service relating to requirements for how the police should respond to calls for assistance (see Table 2). Though some differences of opinion were observed, subsequent iterations broadly concurred with the list. However, in the subsequent group discussions, participants expressed difficulty in isolating specific items as having greater priority. Rather, they saw domain items as being linked, whereby, for example, a greater focus on local problems, proportionality and service equity would help in investigating and solving crimes. Indeed, most saw a focus on public safety, local problems and fast and proportionate response as a priority. Investigating and solving crimes was also seen as a priority, but one which many participants felt was currently lacking.

Consistently, the concept of 'proportionate response' was identified as important, with a focus on public safety and local area problems, as noted by the following participant:

> I think maybe something around [providing a] proportionate response … You see too often the police going beyond what's [proportionate and] violently responding to someone. In a situation where someone is being violent towards them [the police], there may be some legitimacy for that but sometimes it's not. So, maybe something around proportionate response. *Focus Group – Round 2: Lancaster*

Perhaps inevitably, what participants wanted from police was often framed in terms of what they felt was currently absent. A lack of follow-up on reported crimes was a frequent point of frustration. This made people feel that they were not being engaged by the police and that their reports were not being taken seriously. Participants were able to recognise that police needed to respond to crimes based on risk of harm; nonetheless, they stressed that even experiences of minor crime can become a deeply personal matter in relation to which they wanted some form of follow-up, acknowledgement or recognition from police.

> I've been a victim of crime and obviously, I didn't have any information of what happened because my number plates on my car were stolen and this happened outside where I live and I just had to buy another one myself. There was no follow-up of, "Who stole it?" It's like the police don't want to waste their time on small crimes but to me, it's not a small crime because I'm the one that had to physically buy it and replace it, which cost me.
>
> *Focus Group – Round 3: London*

It should be stressed again that local policing was seen to be underperforming in relation to the above activities. Most participants underscored that the police were slow to respond to so-called lower-level crimes which affected them personally, or to recurrent local issues (if they responded at all). It was also stressed that when they did visit victims, the police failed to follow up on the report with any updates.

### Police behaviour and treatment

Analysis of R1 discussions revealed seven elements of service or requirements for how police should behave whilst interacting with members of the public (see Table 2).

In R2 and R3 discussions, building trust was stressed by all groups. Here, consistency was seen to be key, with trust-building observed to require a long-term investment in cultivating better relationships rather than a 'quick fix'. Consistency across public interactions, officers, and police procedures and treating people with fairness and respect was highlighted. The word 'proportionate' was again emphasised: it was important that police behaviour was proportionate to the situation.

Police relationships with young people were considered most eroded, with all groups identifying a need for more positive interactions to improve relationships, respect and cooperation. This is illustrated by the following discussion among participants:

> P1 - I've gone with building trust … with building relationships within the community, establishing relationships with young people in the community … . to me that kind of covers the same area. Again, it goes back to what I

said about building trust, if they're trying to solve crimes, they're more likely to get the response from the public if the public trust the police in the first place.

P2 - I agree with that about building relationships because I think the young'uns … . they've just not got any respect.

P3 - That's why it's called "building", building takes time. It's not an overnight fix, it never is going to be.

*Focus Groups – Round 2: Lancaster*

Most participants welcomed greater police involvement in schools delivering early intervention education, though some felt that the police were not best placed to provide such services and that resources would be better allocated elsewhere. Less consensus was found concerning police presence in schools in an enforcement capacity. Some participants thought it would provide a deterrent, while others felt it would continue to negatively impact already damaged relationships between the police and young people.

Participants again expressed the opinion that all elements in this domain were standard requirements and were interrelated: for example, that treating people with fairness and respect helped to build trust, public engagement and increase reporting. And, again, local policing was felt to be falling short on these requirements:

I think for me that bit about fair treatment, respectful and trustworthy [is important], because I think without that you might not report a crime in the first place. I think it is something that's missing now, generally. I feel that maybe people aren't always sure of what response they're going to get, particularly if it's the less obvious crimes, so if it is things around mental health, for example, maybe domestic violence issues sometimes, there's a lack of trust there about actually once I report this am I going to be treated in a way that makes me feel worse or better.

*Focus Groups – Round 2: Leeds*

Finally, although some participants commented on race-based discrimination in policing, broadly, non-white participants did not talk directly about this issue. Reflections were refracted through, or embedded interpretations of, 'place' rather than race. That is, differential police relations and responses were talked about in terms of neighbourhood characteristics, such as socioeconomic status/levels of disadvantage, which implicitly spoke to racial composition.

### *Police presence and engagement*

Analysis of R1 discussions revealed seven elements or requirements around police presence and police engagement (see Table 2). References to the 'bobby on the beat' were made multiple times in every group in ways that evoked a narrative of loss, social decline and nostalgia, but also of an organisational dislocation and distance between police and public that felt simultaneously real and imagined. Significant reductions to police officer numbers in the period of austerity from 2010 and the closure of police stations were cited as tangible evidence of a steady erosion in service. Participants recounted how they used to see and encounter their local police on foot:

I mean in my young days you had the bobbies on patrol, they knew the kids in the area, they grew up knowing the kids, and that is prevention because they see the bobby coming and it puts them off doing something they shouldn't. It's an early learning curve for them, so there should be more bobbies on the beat.

*Focus Groups – Round 1: Lichfield*

Greater police presence absolutely, on foot and by car, that makes people feel much more secure and again, there's not that many police about is there, because of money …

*Focus Groups – Round 1: Lancaster*

Though participants generally spoke favourably about police community support officers (PCSOs), often citing positive community relationships, there was a sense that their powers were limited

and that they were not 'proper police'. There was a strong focus in discussions on the desire for, and importance of, dedicated 'community police officers', both accessible to community members and with whom they could build relations of trust. For many, their only experience of police was enforcement-heavy response policing, as reflected in the following discussion among participants:

> P1 - Again, it all centres around trust.
>
> P2 - Like we used to get your bobby on the beat … greater police presence and the ability to speak to someone directly … If there is more police presence you are going to naturally have more of an engagement with them, and if you can speak directly to someone it's going to encourage disclosure.
>
> P3 - Yeah, breaking down the barrier … you're not just seeing police in a moment of emergency.
>
> P4 - Well that's where I think policing has gone from being preventative to responsive now and we know why, it's down to the cuts.
>
> *Focus Groups – Round 1: Lancaster*

Similar sentiments were expressed in relation to the closure of local police stations. Many participants said they were unable to identify their nearest station. For some, especially older members, police stations were seen as symbols of protection and police availability, as well as providing a latent deterrent. While participants saw closure of police stations as resource-related, they felt the loss of visible policing keenly:

> We used to have a local police station within the village, and you'd know the bobby and now you don't. I think that would answer community questions and just having a police presence around would also, you'd just get to see them around rather than at someone's house perhaps or when you've had to call them.
>
> *Focus Groups – Round 2: Leeds*

Relatedly, there were mixed thoughts on police engaging more in non-traditional types of communication, such as WhatsApp and other social media, especially when some participants felt they couldn't even reach police via traditional means:

> I don't think there is confidence in the police. They've done themselves no favours, no presence, you make a phone call, you get a crime number, nobody comes to see you. If there's a presence after a burglary or your car's stolen, something, vandalism in the area, nobody comes. A police presence in my eyes, it's very important, it gives people confidence … . greater police presence is probably the most important thing.
>
> *Focus Groups – Round 1: Leeds*

Against this sceptical background, participants found it difficult – when prompted – to articulate their expectations and desired preferences for what they want from future policing. They found it difficult to see past the low prospects of positive encounters with police rooted in local experiences. This served to blinker participant's horizon of expectations – many found it hard to imagine that policing could or would improve in these types of areas.

### *Crime priorities*

Groups were asked to volunteer and then categorise crime types and behaviours requiring or possibly requiring a police response into low, medium and high priority, along with those they thought required more than just a police response, or a non-police response (see Table 3). Prompts were only given where crime types were clearly being omitted from discussion. Many participants reported difficulty prioritising crime types. Some R2 and R3 participants did not pick any, but instead wrote comments/notes in workbooks qualifying different response times for specific crimes. For example, if anti-social behaviour was a repeated issue, it should be trigger a rapid response. Nonetheless, across group discussions, there was consensus that crimes against the person, in progress, and involving weapon-carrying should be highest priority for an emergency police response. There was less consensus over illicit drug use and drug dealing:

**Table 3.** Crime and incident priorities assigned by members of focus group discussions.

| Priorities for Police Response | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *High Priority* | *Medium Priority* | *Low Priority* | *Requires a multi-agency response* |
| Crime against a person (including domestic abuse)<br>Weapon carrying<br>Crimes still in progress<br>Drug dealing | Property crimes<br>Drug use<br>Antisocial behaviour | Petty theft<br>Traffic offences | Children's wellbeing<br>Domestic abuse<br>Addiction<br>Mental ill-health presentations<br>Homelessness<br>Missing persons<br>Hate crimes |

> I don't agree as well with what X said, drug-dealing. I don't see why that should be a high priority. I think that should be a medium priority and theft should be going to the high priority, should be.
>
> *Focus Groups – Round 2: London*

Opinions varied according to the class of drug, if drug use was a visible, an enduring local issue (public use, paraphernalia, etc.), or if visible drug dealing was a 'significant' problem in their local area:

> P1 - I was surprised drug use was actually on the list, and certainly not as high as medium priority, because I think it depends on the nature of the drug use. If it's in someone's house behind a closed door, it's not a priority.
>
> P2 - And it's not causing any antisocial behaviour.
>
> *Focus Groups – Round 2: Leeds*

Many R2 and R3 participants saw this prioritisation exercise as ultimately unhelpful. Rather, an understanding of what was relevant to their local neighbourhood was seen as important in determining response priority. For example, one participant talked about a spate of burglaries in his neighbourhood, others of car thefts, or repeated anti-social behaviour that needed to be prioritised. In such cases, the context was as important as the crime type in determining what constituted an appropriate response.

### *Police response to vulnerability*

There was broad consensus that a multi-agency response was needed for presentations of mental ill health, illicit drug use, incidents involving homeless people, domestic abuse, and issues involving children (see Table 3). However, there was also a clear consensus that the police were required as first responders to assess/address risk and safety concerns for incidents involving potentially vulnerable groups before signposting/referral to other agencies:

> If another member of the public is at imminent risk because of the way that mental health issue is presenting, then it's slightly different than if someone is just struggling and needs the support of an external service … They're having some form of mental breakdown, the police have got to stop it or slow it down … I feel vulnerable so my instant instinct would tell me just to ring the police. That is what they're there for, to make me feel safe.
>
> *Focus Groups – Round 3: Leeds*

> I've always been brought up told that the police are there to make me feel safe. Regardless of this individual's situation or home life or mental wellbeing, it's about the police making me feel safe so to me, it's still in the same category.
>
> *Focus Groups – Round 3: Leeds*

However, some participants expressed concern that a police response may aggravate situations and cause more harm to vulnerable persons. This consideration made them hesitant to make an emergency call:

> I would always be cautious because you don't know how the police are going to respond and I wouldn't want to risk a potentially vulnerable person being criminalized when actually it's support services that they need.
>
> *Focus Groups – Round 3: Leeds*

Numerous participants stressed that illicit drug use and addiction are health issues requiring healthcare intervention rather than criminal justice consequences. Yet most felt that a police response was required where a related crime has taken place, before referral to other more appropriate services. This was also seen as important in not criminalising young people.

Groups questioned police responses to presentations of mental ill health and homelessness where no immediate risk was observed. Indeed, in relation to the behaviour of people from vulnerable groups, where no immediate or pending danger was observable, most participants said that they would not call the police and that the police were not the service best equipped to respond:

> Just on presentations of mental ill health and homelessness, if you discount what's in the brackets about crimes, I'm wondering why the police are going there at all on those two.
>
> *Focus Groups – Round 3: Lancaster*

For incidents involving children, mentally ill people, illicit drug users, homeless people and victims of crime, the police were also seen to have responsibility to refer vulnerable people to appropriate services, and to liaise.

Assessments of risk and the decision to call the police also appeared to depend on whether the behaviour was deemed habitual, and thus normalised, in the local area. As such, assessments of risk differed across districts (e.g. London versus Lichfield, etc.) and neighbourhoods (urban versus rural):

> Naturally, I think I'd ignore it, because I think I'm a bit immune. I've got people in my area who are known for acting up and tend to be homeless shouting and rowing with each other. You tend to ignore it because if it's semi-regular, then you almost know they're not going to do anything to themselves or anyone.
>
> *Focus Groups – Round 3: London*

> It's different though … it might be a bit more normal to see it nearer your house because you've got a pub, whereas I live in a really quiet village down at the bottom of a cul-de-sac so for me to see something like that would be highly unusual and it may be why my response would be quicker to ring the police straight away.
>
> *Focus Groups – Round 3: Leeds*

### *Definition of local policing*

Although we have discussed the domains identified individually, participants recognised and indeed emphasised inextricable links between them. For example, many felt that greater neighbourhood police presence and engagement would help build the trust fundamental to positive police-public interactions, public cooperation, and the ability of police to deal effectively with local priorities, which in turn would foster improved public confidence. The relationship between police response, behaviour, presence and crime priorities was captured in the definition of local policing developed by the groups. Discussions of the question 'what is local policing and what does it do on a local level?' produced the following definition:

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
- Contactable at 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 people in the community.Local police should be present, know their diverse community, and understand the community context and values, including fostering ongoing communication and collaboration with all areas of the community.*Focus Groups - Round 3*

Recall that discussions proceeded with minimal prompting from the researchers. It is notable therefore that participants produced a normative definition of local policing. They were not talking about what policing was like in their communities so much as what they thought it *should* be like. This reflects both: (a) the extent of consensus among participants on key areas of police practice and activity; and (b) their broad agreement that the police were currently lacking in these areas. This consensus was evident across the different locations and at each focus group stage.

## Discussion

This study sought public opinion on requirements for local police services. The aim was to produce a minimum policing standard, a set of activities and services that people expect police to be able to provide. The study thus explores the extent to which there is a broad social consensus among diverse publics on police service standards and expectations. Considering current police activities that should be discontinued or be passed on to other agencies, the research also engaged public debate on the appropriate boundaries or limits of police work.

Previous research has revealed considerable individual divergence in perceptions and attitudes toward the police, and often contradictory perceptions and interpretations of the behaviour of police officers (Waddington *et al*. 2017). People frame what they see and hear with inferences about what cannot be seen, imagining 'past occurrences, current possibilities and future potentialities far removed from what they witnessed' (Waddington *et al*. 2015, p. 232). Nonetheless, our findings indicate considerable social consensus on the key requirements and expectations of a police service. In most cases, participants did not find it hard to reach agreement on what was 'in' and what was 'out'. Indeed, in some respects the extent of consensus was notable.

Three iterations of focus groups conducted in London, Leeds, Lancaster and Lichfield with members of the public generated four core policing domains: Police Response, Police Behaviour and Treatment, Police Presence and Engagement, and Crime Priorities. Though the domains emerged as different facets of police service, discussions revealed that participants understood the different facets of police service to be intrinsically linked: they reflected on local policing holistically, often referring back to issues of policing process, for example, when considering desirable outcomes.

While participants agreed with broad priorities indicated in the literature on policing priorities (e.g. Higgins 2019) – i.e. they felt police should prioritise high harm offences – with respect to local police services generic priority lists were seen as not very useful for thinking about how police should respond to and protect communities. Responses to and investigation of local concerns was emphasised, whether these were minor or major drug dealing, spates of burglaries, or persistent anti-social behaviour. Central to considerations here were questions of risk, safety, and the need for a fast response. These issues framed the definition of local policing that participants developed, which did not focus on particular types of crime and disorder as much as the need for a service – the police – that was available and able to deal rapidly with issues involving the potential risk of harm as and when they arose. In this sense, many participants seemed to be instinctive Bittnerians in their

thinking, seeing the police as the organisation that deals with risks, threats, disorders and 'problems' through rapid response and the ability to use force to provide proximate solutions, when and where this is needed (Bittner 1967, 1990).

Despite the clearly expressed desire for an 'omnibus' emergency response service (Reiner 2010), participants were also clear on the limits of policing. They did not feel that police needed to involve themselves in every situation, and they did not believe that police were always the answer to problems or issues even if they were the first responders. On many occasions, participants emphasised the need for police to work closely with, and 'pass things on', to other service providers better placed to provide solutions to problems such as illicit drug use or homelessness. The view that police should not be involved beyond first response in cases of threat of harm but where no crime had been committed indicated a perceived boundary for police intervention. Many participants questioned the value of police responding in any way to mental health episodes or homeless people where no immediate threat was perceived nor crime been committed, suggesting a further boundary. Yet, participants were clear that in as much as the people involved presented a potential risk of harm to themselves or others, an initial police response was justified and indeed necessary (because the tools and powers available to police make them uniquely qualified to do this).

The idea that police should demonstrate equity and proportionality across groups and geographical areas was also emphasised. Moreover, negative judgements of local policing appeared to be made on the basis of deficits in equity and proportionality. These issues were frequently framed in terms of the need for police to provide better role models of good behaviour, and to treat the public with fairness and respect. Such principles were seen as intrinsic to building trust and confidence in the police among communities, which was felt to have eroded. Cases of police misconduct were frequently raised and understood to inform opinions.

Participants thus aligned themselves closely to principles of procedural justice, even though we did not introduce or use this terminology at any point in the discussions. More broadly, having the opportunity to speak with police officers about local problems, greater visibility and availability of neighbourhood policing in the community were seen as important factors in facilitating such positive interactions and building cooperative relationships. Many participants expressed the view that greater police presence would enhance intelligence gathering and the investigative process, helping to solve more crimes. By contrast, for some closure of local police stations was felt as loss of a tangible anchor to protection and police availability. Online crime reporting and engagement in non-traditional forms of communication (e.g. social media groups), while endorsed by some, was seen as an incomplete alterative. Where participants preferred remote to in-person engagement, issues of trust, confidence and/or hostility were often given as reasons for not wanting more police community presence. *Prima facie*, this appears to speak to the need for greater police engagement rather than more remote approaches. And, corresponding with current debate on the legitimacy crisis in policing, police-public relations were observed to have eroded over time and were often considered generally poor. Most participants highlighted lack of trust and confidence as central concerns and that the police were not adequately responding to their safety – and other – needs.

Participants recognised a first-response role for policing in relation to issues presenting threat, whether criminal, incidental or vulnerability-related. This provides clear focus points for debates around police reform, including the need for a renewed emphasis on police training in engaging resistant and vulnerable people to equip officers with the necessary interpersonal, empathy and negotiation skills to de-escalate public encounters.

Finally, our study both resonates and conflicts with elements of current 'Evidence Based' and wider reform within policing. Calling for fairness, respect, professionalism and proportionality, participants clearly saw procedural justice as a central policing standard. Likewise, in advocating locality approaches to addressing crime and supporting multi-agency approaches to solving complex problems, participants saw quite clearly some of the limits of policing and the need for police to work with other partners to achieve desired ends. However, they also saw the answers to these questions in greater neighbourhood policing investment aimed at better community engagement. This, it was

stressed, is fundamental to rebuilding lost trust and confidence, opening up dialogue channels on local concerns, and improving cooperation with the police. Crucially, they also stressed the need for police presence, availability, and commitment to community, not police-defined goals. In as much as EBP emphasises the specialist knowledge and ability of police to make decisions on what and what not to prioritise, our results suggest this 'technocractic' turn in policing may be at odds with what people want from the police.

### *Limitations*

With each focus group comprising eight participants, group composition may not have been representative of local populations, although conducting three focus group iterations in each location may mitigate this limitation. Moreover, despite efforts to ensure diverse public groups, our selection of cities and demographics may not be representative of England, or the UK, more widely. Indeed, those available and recruited through a market research company may represent certain 'types' while excluding other important groups and voices. Addressing this limitation, findings from this study have informed a national survey disseminated to a broader, representative UK sample (Bradford et al. 2025).

Whilst efforts were made by researchers to avoid influencing responses, prompts provided may have inadvertently guided discussions. Equally, the public format of the study may have elicited socially desirable responses from participants. Nonetheless, it is worth emphasising that while broad social consensus was established on a set of key policing activities and responsibilities, participants did voice divergent and sometimes contentious opinions, suggesting that concerns over social desirability may be unwarranted.

## Conclusion

This study has revealed broad social consensus on key police responsibilities in neighbourhood or local policing: to (1) respond efficiently to local problems (2) provide neighbourhood police presence and engagement, and (3) practice fair and equitable treatment. These core components of police service and activity were seen as key to (re)building trust, confidence and cooperative relationships with the public. Yet, police were felt to be failing across all three. By contrast, generic crime priorities were not seen as particularly useful for structuring police responses and protecting communities. Rather, context dependent responses that attended to community requirements were stressed as a fundamentally desirable aspect of the service delivered by police. While there was agreement that an initial police response is necessary where risk of harm presents, that further police involvement was deemed unnecessary where no crime had been committed indicated a perceived boundary for police intervention.

We set out in this paper to derive a minimum police standard, a broad social consensus on a set of activities, services and interventions that the police should, under normal conditions, be able to provide to everyone in their community. Confronted with this idea, participants took a very process-based approach. They were much less exercised about the outcomes police might achieve than with the processes through which policing is conducted, which they felt very strongly should be responsive, fair and respectful, engaged, and 'present'. This is the primary 'service' they saw police as delivering. They also, of course, discussed dealing with crime – where what was important was what the community and not necessarily the police thought about a particular problem. But a clearer issue in most discussions was not crime so much as the need for a service to respond in moments of danger, risk and uncertainty. This might involve crime, in which case police needed to continue to deal with the matter. But it might not, in which case police needed to be able to invoke appropriate third parties to step in.

Much current policing policy, including elements of EBP, positions police 'at the coal face of crime', in an industrial relationship with crime and its causes, where police activity, appropriately

calibrated, can meet implicit or explicit targets to 'produce' reductions in offending and disorder. Our participants would not necessarily resile from this viewpoint. They clearly perceived there to be a link between police activity and crime. But they also, and apparently primarily, saw police as providers of a service to the public, first responders across a whole range of situations and preferably responsive to the needs of their communities. While police could produce reductions in crime and problematic behaviours, often the solutions to these issues lay elsewhere, and police needed to mediate with other service providers to achieve collective, not police-defined, goals.

## Notes

1. https://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/crsp/minimum-income-standard/
2. https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/minimum-income-standard-uk-2023

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## Author contributions

All named authors contributed to the conception of the study and the development of the methodology. DR & CAW led on the fieldwork data collection and initial analysis. BB took the lead in framing the paper and all authors discussed the findings, contributed to the writing of the article and approved the final manuscript.

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