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'Should I Call the Police?' Exploring Public Views on Whether to Invoke Police in Incidents Involving People with Vulnerabilities

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This study explores people's thresholds and reasons for calling the police in response to incidents invoking uncertainty. It draws upon focus group deliberations and a nationally representative survey in which participants were presented with scenarios invoking vulnerability via depictions of disorderly behaviour and potentially harmful activity. People want and expect police to respond rapidly in situations where vulnerable people are identified as presenting immediate risk, while also recognizing that follow-up intervention from specialized services may be necessary. When deciding to call the police, people think about the situational contingencies and readily available means by which an incident might be brought under control, rather than simply their opinions of the police. Distrust in and low expectations of police can be superseded by strategic recourse to police as a mechanism for restoring social order given their situationally justified capacity for force.

KEY WORDS: public expectations, policing, calls for service, police intervention, vulnerability

In most parts of the United Kingdom, 'calling the police' is a prominent part of people's repertoire of methods for handling social problems and managing difficult situations—notably those involving uncertainty or risk of harm. This act can have multiple antecedents and implications. At one extreme, people may dial 999 because they are in immediate fear for their life; at the other, police leaders frequently complain about the multitude of trivial reasons behind 'calls for service' that

tie up considerable police resources. Stories about missed pizza deliveries, coins stuck in supermarket trollies and pets in trees abound.[1] In between lies a vast range of human experience, ranging from high-harm personal victimization, local disputes and neighbourhood concerns, to accidents and safeguarding concerns. Why people make these calls, what they want from police and how they judge any ensuing activity may be just as varied.

Proactive calls for service on the part of the public are the most important trigger of police activity. In England and Wales police receive around 9 million emergency 999 calls each year (HMICFRS 2022: 42), and there are millions more non-emergency 101 calls, contacts via websites, walk-ins at police stations, etc.[2] Servicing these has huge implications for workloads, resourcing, budgets and the ability of police to 'deliver' across the range of tasks assigned to them. There is some evidence that this demand is growing and becoming more complex, often linked to incidents that involve vulnerable people, including mental health concerns, drug and alcohol dependency or homelessness (HMICFRS 2022). Simply put, the public shape policing, in large part through the demands they place and the information they provide through their calls for service. Understanding the reasons why people proactively contact police—and through this the ways they think about policing and the parameters of police-work—is thus central to understanding the (uneven) social and spatial distribution of police activity, and the practical challenges faced by officers called upon to respond to individuals with often complex needs that fall outside of their professional expertise. In the current climate of heightened cynicism and public scrutiny, these remain pressing and consequential issues for police in the UK and beyond (Goldsmith 2010; Bell 2016; Thacher 2022; Rouhani *et al.* 2025).

While responding to vulnerable people is by no means new to policing, the volume of complex problems prompted by the withdrawal of public and third-sector services over recent years of austerity, and growing recognition of vulnerability-related risk within policing, has presented additional challenges. Police constitute a residual institution called upon to intervene when welfare, preventive and protective services go awry (HMICFRS 2018). In many senses, what the police *actually do* is defined by a combination of the limits of other organizational practices, institutional failings and systemic breakdowns in welfare and other public services and, crucially, the demands of the public. Yet, there remains a lack of critical assessment of what the public think police *should do*: the problems they are expected to solve, and whether they are the most appropriate agency to do so.

Given escalating demands, stretched resources and the contemporary crisis in public trust and confidence in the police (Bradford and Jackson 2024), there is an emerging debate about not only what the police are for but also the limits of policing in a modern democratic society (Crawford 2024). The challenge of dealing with people in mental health crises, for example, came to a head in May 2023, when senior police officers—notably Sir Mark Rowley, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police—threatened to withdraw from attending some emergency calls related to mental health incidents. The resultant National Partnership Agreement on *Right Care, Right Person*[3] sets clearer parameters for a police response to a mental health-related incident: to investigate a crime that has occurred or is occurring; or to protect people when there is a real and immediate risk of death or serious harm. Despite criticisms of how the policy was implemented and its impacts on health and social care provision (Health and Social Care Committee 2023), it has stimulated an open discussion about the limits of the police role. While practitioners and

[1] Infamously in 2011, a man apparently called Greater Manchester Police to ask how long to defrost his Christmas turkey—https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/man-dials-999-to-ask-police-188431

[2] https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/police-forces/data/peel-assessments/. According to the *Independent Policing Productivity Review 2023*: 'It is estimated that annually there might be about 40 million calls for service to the police through 999 and 101 telephone numbers' (p. 19)—https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/policing-productivity-review/policing-productivity-review-accessible

[3] Signed in July 2023: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-partnership-agreement-right-care-right-person

academics have been vocal in this debate, largely absent has been the voice of the public, despite the fundamental role they play in triggering police activity.

In this paper, we consider how people think about calling the police in a specific set of neighbourhood situations: where evidence of a crime may be uncertain, yet the risk of harm and the apparent vulnerability of individuals may warrant some sort of official response. Our intention is to explore the interplay between members of the public's experiences and expectations of policing, how trust and distrust operate within given contexts and the ways in which police are called upon as a problem-solving resource for regaining control of situations, albeit within wider cultural and structural constraints. We begin by reviewing what we know about public capacity and willingness to intervene and call police in response to contingent and problematic situations. We then go on to outline our research findings from deliberative focus groups and a national survey before discussing implications and conclusions.

PUBLIC WILLINGNESS TO INTERVENE

Public responses to problematic situations are informed by a mix of instrumental factors (the costs and benefits of intervening or reporting) and normative motivations and commitments (social relations and trust), as well as the social characteristics of the individuals concerned, situational contingencies and the wider social and physical context: who is involved, where events occur and what resources are immediately available. Questions about whether or not to intervene or call upon others invoke the complex interface between informal and formal social control, where social control is understood as the direct supervision of behaviour, the enforcement of norms and considered or intentional responses to deviant or problematic conduct (Cohen 1985).

Jones and Newburn (2002) have described how the decline of 'secondary social control' roles such as caretakers and bus conductors fostered increasing formalization of social control. In their place, 'primary social control' agents like police and private security now shoulder greater responsibility for maintaining order. This shift has been shaped by broader changes in social expectations of public service delivery and the symbolic status of police in British public life, even while public confidence has fluctuated (Loader 2016).

Against a backdrop of growing reliance on formal control, countertrends that seek to promote bystander intervention and the mobilization of community controls are also apparent. Insights from earlier psychological research into the 'bystander effect' by Darley and Latané (1968) identified social inhibition, diffusion of responsibility and audience effects as key barriers to action. Building on this, contemporary efforts, notably in the context of violence against women and girls, have sought to operationalize active 'bystander intervention' as a tool for reinforcing pro-social norms (Bennett *et al.* 2014). Comparable strategies have emerged in relation to hate crime (Flax *et al.* 2025), radicalization and other anti-social behaviours, urging individuals without formal enforcement roles to act as 'capable guardians' (Cohen and Felson 1979). These approaches promote the 'four D's' of direct, distract, delegate and delay, blending direct involvement with indirect actions such as alerting authorities such as the police. They point to and seek to reinforce informal, individual level choices to intervene in problematic situations.

At a community level, patterns of intervention are also shaped by structural and social factors. Crime has long been associated with disadvantage and urban ecology, but the concept of 'collective efficacy'—the cohesion and shared willingness among neighbours to act for the common good (Sampson *et al.* 1997; Sampson 2008)—provides a powerful explanatory lens for understanding why people 'get involved'. It advances beyond social capital to focus on the activation of social ties in maintaining order. Where trust and cohesion are low, informal intervention is less likely and crime more prevalent (Hipp 2016). Collective efficacy also fosters individual confidence to act

(Bandura 1995), while shaping local norms about when intervention is expected and when it is instead deferred to formal authorities.

PUBLIC DECISIONS TO INVOLVE THE POLICE

A diverse range of factors thus influence patterns of social control. 'Calling the police' is a practice likely to be differentially exercised across individuals and groups in the population. Yet, the current 'crisis' of trust and confidence in policing presents a troubling backcloth to such decisions. A large body of research has explored the link between trust and people's willingness or propensity to call the police to report crime (Carr *et al.* 2007; Murphy and Cherney 2012; Timukaite and Buil-Gil 2025). Similar links exist between related constructs—most notably procedural justice and legitimacy—and willingness to cooperate. Bolger and Walter's (2019: 95) systematic review includes 56 studies measuring procedural justice, legitimacy and 'willingness to cooperate' with police, typically defined as self-assessed likelihood of reporting crime or suspicious behaviour. Findings strongly support the association between procedural justice and legitimacy, and between both and cooperation. An earlier narrative review focusing on crime victims found similar results (Koster *et al.* 2016), where 'cooperation' often meant whether the crime was reported.

What marks much of this literature is that the act of calling the police is framed as cooperation *with* police (Brantingham and Uchida 2021). The argument is, essentially, that high levels of trust and/or legitimacy enable people to feel calling police is a worthwhile thing to do, that officers will respond appropriately if summoned, and indeed that they have a duty to support police in 'the fight against crime'. The same factors apply to crime victims in their decisions about whether to report to the police, albeit they tend to have more at stake, personally, in such decisions and interactions. Thus conceived, calling the police is more about the relationship between the individual and the (police) institution than about the nature of the problem, risk or vulnerability and/or people's desire for order and security.

There remains a lacuna in the current literature, much of which is quantitative and concerned with the effects of institutional trust and legitimacy. Decisions about whether to call police are seen primarily in terms of what people think *about the police*, not what they think about the events concerned and situational contingencies. Yet, qualitative research has demonstrated a variety of factors that may shape decisions to involve the police (Bell 2016). These range from the desire to invoke formal social control—often to complement or supersede already attempted informal efforts and to address crimes that are sufficiently dangerous or complex to warrant an immediate formal response (Carr 2003; Warner 2007)—to tactical use of the police to intervene in conflicts, fights and even on-going feuds (Koch 2018: 154–5). Studies that have considered why victims of domestic violence do or do not call the police have also paid close attention to how victims construe their situation, as well as the likely police response to it (Wolf *et al.* 2003).

Bell's (2016) ethnographic research of disadvantaged African American mothers in Chicago offers a rare analysis of decisions to call the police in a context of deeply engrained distrust and cynicism. Rather than framing such acts simply as an expression of trust, she highlights the willingness to rely on police to provide safety and a problem-solving resource in certain situations through occasional proactive engagement. Bell demonstrates how trust and distrust operate in seemingly paradoxical ways on a micro-level, whereby distrust is suspended and replaced by limited, circumstantial and context-specific occasions of strategic 'situational trust'. The cultural repertoires that Bell identifies not only help explain the incongruity between cynicism and reliance on police but also how 'trust varies depending on how law and legal authorities are operating within interactive moments' (Bell 2016: 338).

THE CURRENT STUDY

In the United Kingdom, calls to the police by victims of crime have declined as crime itself has fallen, yet overall calls to police have increased (ONS 2025). Many represent the invocation of police to deal with a problematic situation in which the caller may not be personally involved but wishes to see resolved or somehow addressed. The question then becomes, under which conditions, where and when, do people identify such situations and consider the police to be an appropriate means of handling them? These questions have become particularly salient given the rising volume of demand linked to incidents involving vulnerable individuals, and ongoing concerns about officers' capacity and preparedness to respond to issues such as mental ill health, child safeguarding and other vulnerabilities. Amid an ongoing crisis of police legitimacy, officers' responses to such incidents may shape public perceptions, confidence and willingness to call the police in important ways.

Adopting a novel approach to address this gap, this study sought to explore public expectations and elicit views on when and how the police or other relevant authorities should respond to problematic neighbourhood incidents where vulnerability is invoked. As part of a wider research project (Bradford *et al.* 2025*a*; 2025*b*), the study entailed two phases of data collection (see Figure 1).[4] Initially, three rounds of focus groups were conducted over the course of approximately 6 months in 2023–24. Recruitment to the focus groups was undertaken by MRGFR,[5] a market research company commissioned to provide this service against specified criteria. All participants were aged over 18. The locations of the focus groups were organized to incorporate metropolitan, urban and semi-rural populations with different patterns of contact with police as well as to include diversity by age, gender and ethnicity. There were 93 participants in total: 50 female, 42 male, 1 unknown; 9 were aged under 30, 60 aged 30–59, and 24 over 60; 71 were White, 12 Black, with small numbers from other ethnic groups.

Participants for the London groups were required to have had recent contact with police (in the last 5 years) to ensure that we heard from people with significant experience of police interactions as well as members of the public who might have had minimal contact. Individuals with previous employment in policing were excluded from all groups. Each focus group lasted for approximately 90 minutes.

Subsequently, we commissioned a population representative survey of England, Wales and Scotland conducted in late 2023. The survey fielded questions developed from the focus groups around the three minimum policing standard domains of: (1) Response, (2) Behaviour and Treatment, and (3) Presence and Engagement. Alongside these items, we fielded a range of other questions, covering public attitudes towards police and contact with officers, views on the limits and boundaries of policing, and when behaviours or issues warrant or require police intervention—including some of the 'scenarios' developed in the focus groups. The survey thus responds directly to Bell's invitation to 'better capture' the situated nuances of both public cynicism and reliance on police 'by asking [survey] respondents at a more fine-grained level about their use of police in specific situations' (2016: 338).

In this paper, we first analyse data from the third and final round of focus groups, at which participants were presented with four non-crime scenarios invoking vulnerability and asked to discuss how they would respond in each scenario. Reflecting incidents salient for members of the public, the four scenarios emerged from and were informed by earlier discussions in the first two rounds of focus groups, where incidents involving issues of social disorder sparked lively debate about which agencies, if any, should respond and how. To explore thresholds for recourse to emergency services, each scenario (*Man in Street, Domestic Incident, Family in Trouble* and *Youth*

[4] Ethical approval for both studies was granted from the relevant university authorities.
[5] Market Research for greater results: https://www.mrfgr.com/

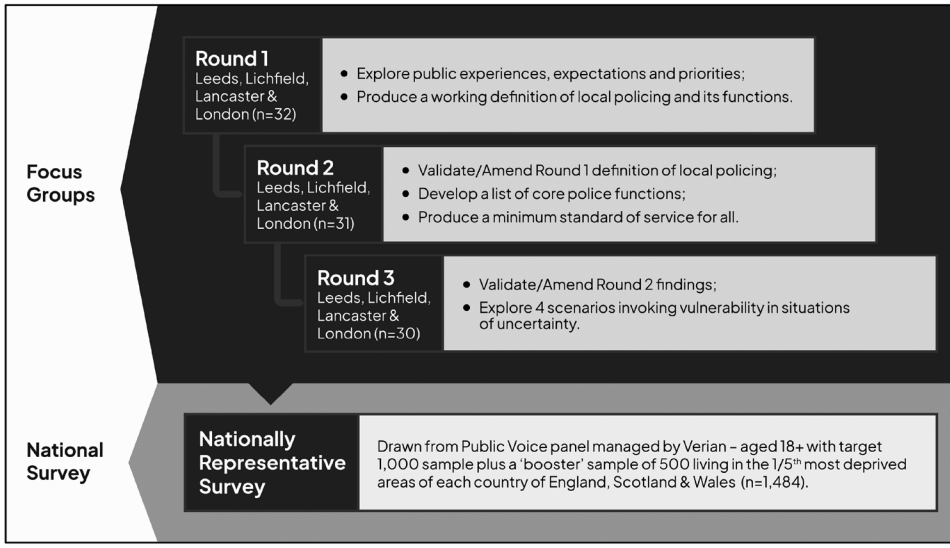

Fig. 1 Minimum policing standard study

Anti-Social Behaviour) included features indicative of vulnerability. These were iteratively escalated in terms of seriousness through the provision of additional information. Focus group participants were offered a number of possible responses, including calling the police or contacting other services. At each stage they had the opportunity to discuss their responses. Through this methodology we were able to engage participants in rich discussions concerning their reactions to the hypothetical scenarios along with their expectations of the police. Table 1 presents a brief description of each scenario. Within each, as the situations escalated, participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions.[6] They first answered each question individually by writing their response down in a workbook after which responses were discussed collectively as a group.

To explore further the factors that might shape public willingness to contact police in scenarios involving potentially vulnerable, and perhaps potentially dangerous, individuals, we developed two of the scenarios—*Man in Street* and *Family in Trouble*—into items that we fielded in the national survey. In the quantitative analysis that follows presentation of the focus group data, we consider the correlates of people's reported intentions to call the police in these two scenarios.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Both the focus group study and national survey were approved by the relevant research ethics committee at University College London.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with participant identifiers removed. Only locality (i.e. Lancaster, Leeds, Lichfield, London) and gender data were retained in the transcribed dataset for analysis. Two researchers independently coded the interview data, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) analytic framework, remaining attentive to

[6] Full scenario descriptions and question schedule are available at: https://vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/minimum-policing-standard/

Table 1. Scenarios

1. Man in Street	A man on the street in front of your home is causing a commotion. The scenario escalates from yelling, to knocking things over, to gesturing with a broken bottle.
2. Domestic Incidents	The couple next door has a young child. You are aware of possible domestic incidents, which escalate to include drug and alcohol use.
3. Family in Trouble	Living next door to a single mother with multiple children, you notice disturbances from their residence. The children are less well-kept, and strangers visit the property at night. The scenario escalates to include awareness of the mother's mental health and/or addiction issues.
4. Youth Anti-Social Behaviour	You are aware of a group of young boys engaging in increasingly serious forms of anti-social behaviour, which escalates to reveal the boys committing theft.

emerging patterns in risk perceptions and other prompts influencing decision-making. Initial codes were developed inductively through this process. To ensure consistency, 20 per cent of transcripts were double-coded by both researchers, with emerging discrepancies discussed and resolved collaboratively. Final themes were identified through an iterative process of thematic analysis and wider team discussions.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Thresholds for invoking a police response

There was broad agreement among participants across all groups that they would call the police and expect a police response to incidents where they perceived imminent risk to the safety of themselves or others. Their rationale was that the central police role is to protect communities, and that the police alone possess the power to use force to bring dangerous situations under control and, if necessary, apprehend the perpetrator to minimize risk. The following observation prompted by the *Man in Street* scenario is illustrative:

> With this scenario we're looking at where it's getting potentially very dangerous… You want the police there ASAP, let them carve the initial [response] and then assess and move on to whoever should be dealing with that person. [Leeds]

In this sense, many participants seemed to be instinctive Bittnerians in their thinking, seeing the police as the organization that deals with situations where '*something-that-ought-not-to-be-happening-and-about-which-someone-had-better-do-something-now*!' (Bittner 1990: 127). In other words, the unique competence of police is assumed to be to manage a host of risks, threats, disorders and 'problems' through rapid response and the ability to use force to provide proximate solutions, when and where this is needed. This was directly articulated during discussions:

> Police… I think they've probably got training in all different areas. They're the only ones that could have the force to stop him hurting someone else or himself because I don't think ambulance would turn up without police presence in these situations. [London]

It was apparent that in circumstances of immediate risk to safety, the *need for* police frequently superseded opinions and attitudes *about* police. In other words, most participants said they would call the police when they viewed a situation as dangerous regardless of whether they had previously expressed trust (or distrust) in the police. They seemed to be thinking more about the situation

than the police, and construed the latter as means by which that situation could be brought under control.

This pragmatic and somewhat instrumental stance was overlain with normative and symbolic overtones. Calling the police invokes not only on their capacity for coercion but also their symbolic power. Participants made frequent references to the idea that police are essential guardians of social order to be called upon when things are not as they should be:

> I've always been 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. [Leeds]

Like Bittner, focus group participants also articulated concern about the limits of police involvement, the necessary parsimony of police intervention and limited recourse to force, especially with vulnerable people: as Bittner noted: 'The skill involved in police work consists of retaining recourse to force while seeking to avoid its use and using it only in minimal amounts' (1990: 262). There was a consensus that officers should intervene in the most restrained way possible to resolve the immediate problem, and that the police response should cease following the elimination of risk where no crime has been committed. After this, it was felt that cases involving vulnerable people should be referred to more appropriate specialist agencies, such as mental health and substance misuse services.

> I would call the police but I don't really think they'd be the best ones to do that. I think it's more… mental health… So, I'd probably call the police but tell them that, be clear about the situation, so maybe if they could then contact the mental health service. [London]

Some participants recognized the complexity of such incidents and potential for police to criminalize individuals with primary health and social problems:

> They're going to use force to get the bottle from him, they're going to cuff him—this is all just making the situation worse. They're not really going to have the right amount of empathy. He's just someone who's being a nuisance and acting violently… He's just going to get cuffed, taken to hospital, then maybe arrested when he's well enough to be arrested, which doesn't solve anything. [London]

When not to call the police

Participants also identified thresholds below which summoning police was not appropriate, where no response was immediately necessary or recourse to alternative agencies deemed more appropriate.

No observable risk

There was general agreement that the police should not be called out to non-crime incidents where there was no observable risk to self or others. Some participants opined that the decision to call the police on the basis of speculation but no evidence of wrongdoing or harm represented an intrusion of privacy. Danger to self or others represented a threshold indicator:

> I'd probably wait and hope he calms down, calling the police only if I'm sure he was a danger, if he was noticed to be a threat to people. [Lancaster]

In incidents involving presentations of mental ill health or suspected child welfare issues, unless immediate risk to safety was observed, the police were often seen not to be an appropriate responder.

Escalating vulnerability

Although the decision to call the police in dangerous situations appeared often to override issues of trust, attitudes towards the police did play a role in participants' willingness to summon officers. Some were reluctant to call the police in response to incidents involving vulnerable people, even where events had escalated, voicing concerns that police may escalate rather than de-escalate, compounding vulnerabilities or criminalizing vulnerable people:

> In these scenarios, I'm always erring on the side of not putting someone in the crosshairs of the police and criminalizing them potentially if there is vulnerability there. Actually, it's a support service that they need, rather than the police… Having seen how the police have dealt with vulnerable people in the past through some of my other work, I do not have that faith. [Leeds].

Lack of confidence that the police would respond appropriately to incidents was linked to views of officers' limited skills in dealing appropriately with vulnerable people. Some participants stressed that they would opt for a health service response even if risk to safety was apparent. Others felt they would be reluctant to call the police where they had done so in the past and been let down by the response. Underlining that trust remains a relevant concern, previous negative experiences and interactions with police generated a sense that future calls for assistance would be met by similar responses.

Variation in risk perception and decisions to call the police

While participants identified risk of harm as the key factor in prompting a call to the police, there were certain key differences in how risks were conceived and appropriate responses considered.

Gender differences

Female participants generally appeared to be more risk aware and risk averse, often expressing that they would call the police earlier, citing 'potential' risk as a threshold and the police role as protectors called to assess and address events. More often, women acknowledged their own vulnerability, fear playing a role in their decision and their cultural assumptions about the police as designated protectors. One female participant noted:

> I'm at home with three children, I feel vulnerable so my instinct would tell me to ring the police. That is what they're there for, to make me feel safe if I don't feel safe. [Leeds]

For men, there was a more frequent emphasis on waiting until risk became manifest before calling the police, often stating that they would observe the situation or approach those involved to try and resolve the incident themselves. One male participant asserted:

> I personally would try and calm him down from a safer distance… Wouldn't call the police unless it became a danger to his life or someone else's life. I feel like they're already under immense pressure and being called out for some random bloke in the street walking up and down, it's just not needed. [Lichfield]

Neighbourhood context

Participant's experience of their own neighbourhoods shaped their responses. Some seemed accustomed to observing incidents analogous to those presented, including those who lived on a high street or close to a pub, for example, where shouting and smashing bottles may be a normal occurrence. They were less likely to say they would call the police or indeed any service. This reflects previous observations that responses to problematic situations vary by neighbourhood and what is considered 'normal' and therefore tolerated (Sampson 2008). Tolerance to various iterations of the scenarios was justified by a sense that such situations play out harmlessly and/or becoming used to them and inured to any potential risk.

Differences between groups were also observed. Those drawn from rural Lichfield, where such incidents were said to be rare, expressed greater willingness to call the police earlier than those from Leeds and Lancaster, who were more likely to postpone calling the police until risk of harm became more evident. The low population density of the Lichfield area, and residents' appreciation that they may be the only 'natural surveillance' or 'capable guardians' in a given situation, may have influenced their likelihood to intervene by calling the police. The Lichfield participants tended to indicate earlier recourse to calling the police across all four scenarios. There was less diversity and a stronger sense of shared norms, accompanied by more traditional views of the police. These factors may prompt greater readiness to invoke the police to uphold shared interests.

The hesitancy among residents of metropolitan neighbourhoods in Leeds and London to call the police may be influenced by the greater population density and diffused responsibility associated with a bystander effect. For instance, one Leeds resident noted: 'I would just monitor for something that escalates, and I would probably just observe the situation to see if anyone would call the police'. In the London group the propensity to call the police appeared significantly lower, with greater reluctance to get involved:

> 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 because otherwise, they'd have done it by now. [London]

Differences between scenarios

The *Man in Street* scenario elicited the earliest and most widespread decision to call the police. Many indicated that they would call the police in response to the initial situation, where the male is shouting. Reasons given included the sense of unpredictability depicted in the scenario and the immediacy of risk in a dynamically unfolding event:

> I would have called the police straight away because whoever's house he was outside, that might be a woman in there petrified because it's an ex or something, and you just don't know what's going to happen. So no, I'd call the police straight away and I wouldn't approach, I wouldn't even go out of the house. [Lichfield]

An immediate potential for harm was identified, especially with the damage to public property; then even more so with the smashing of bottles intimating an imminent risk of violence. Again, a sense of personal vulnerability appears focal.

The 'behind closed doors' nature of the *Domestic Incidents* scenario also influenced participants' thinking. Here, a relatively widespread predilection for 'minding your own business' was evident. Participants highlighted difficulties in distinguishing a loud argument or crying child from

domestic abuse, which would likely inform a reluctance to intervene or call for services. The threshold for many was clearer evidence of physical violence or risk to children. Many indicated that they would intervene informally in the first instance by approaching the female neighbour.

> I'd try and speak to them if it was a neighbour and I knew them … I wouldn't call the police unless there was evidence of violence. [Leeds]

Reflections on the other scenarios suggested that a police response would only be instigated as the situation escalated. The threshold appeared to be clear indication of immediate safeguarding concerns or where crimes had been committed. Participants expressed a greater likelihood of calling social services, considering safeguarding concerns and mental health services when the mother's issues were revealed.

National survey

Selecting the *Man in Street* and *Family in Trouble* scenarios for further exploration in the national survey, we developed a number of hypotheses based on the focus group discussions and the wider literature on propensities to invoke the police. These hypotheses motivate the analysis of the survey data presented below.

H1: Those with higher trust will be more willing to call police and involve them in the types of situations described in the scenarios (see Bolger and Walters 2019).

H2: Those more concerned about crime will be more willing to invoke the police (see Bradford and Jackson 2016).

H3: Recent victims of crime will be more likely to call police.

H4: Those less tolerant of uncertainty will be more willing to invoke the police.

H5: Those who are more engaged in civic life—an indicator of engagement with community—will be more ready to call the police (see Goudriaan *et al.* 2006; Gau 2014).

H6: Individuals with a greater need for order, and who are more inclined to see potential offenders in a negative light, will be more likely to invoke police. Specifically, those with more authoritarian attitudes will be more willing to invoke the police (see Bradford and Jackson 2016; Gerber and Jackson 2017).

Survey methodology

Verian (formerly Kantar Public), who were commissioned in November 2023 to run a survey with a target respondent sample of 1,500 using their Public Voice Panel. The target population was GB individuals aged 18+ living in residential accommodation. The sample was 1,000 GB-wide plus a 'boost' of 500 from among those living in the most deprived fifth of each country (England, Scotland and Wales). At the time the survey was conducted, the Public Voice panel comprised 22,142 members in England, Scotland and Wales. Most were recruited via the Address Based Online Surveying method in which (probabilistically) sampled individuals complete a 20-minute recruitment questionnaire either by web or on paper. The sample for the MiPoS survey was drawn from among these 22,142 members. The panel was stratified by Neighbourhood Index of Multiple Deprivation, and then by sex/age, before a systematic random sample was drawn. In total, 4,888 panel members were issued to the field, and the survey closed on 20/12/23 with 1,517 completes, of whom 1,484 passed quality control tests and constitute the basic sample used in this paper. All surveys were completed online, and those who completed the survey were offered a £10 voucher.

Dependent variables

The two scenarios fielded in the survey were presented on an escalating basis, starting from an apparently less serious situation and evolving to an apparently more serious situation. Respondents were first presented with a baseline scenario and asked whether they would call the police (*Man in Street*) or the police, social services, or intervene themselves (*Family in Trouble*—here we concentrate only on calling the police). They were then presented with new information, twice in the *Man in Street* and three times in the *Family in Trouble* scenario, and at each stage asked if they would now call the police.

We created three dummy variables for the *Man in Street* and four for the *Family in Trouble* scenario, coded 1 if the respondent said they would call the police at the relevant stage and 0 if not. We hypothesized that these items were indicators of an underlying latent trait—respondents' propensities to call the police in the types of situations described—and we used one parameter Item Response Theory (IRT) models to analyse responses to each set of dummy variables (using the statistical package Stata 18.5). IRT is an appropriate method in this case because the items were specifically designed to have decreasing levels of 'difficulty'—that is, we expected more respondents to say they would call the police at the final (most serious) stage than at the initial (least serious) stage, with the other responses ranked in between. Results from this modelling are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2 shows that for the *Man in Street* the three items performed as expected—Item 3 was the least 'difficult' (almost all—96 per cent—respondents said they would call the police at this stage), and Item 1 the most 'difficult', although even here 45 per cent said they would call the police. Table 3 shows that the four items representing the *Family in Trouble* also performed broadly as expected. Item 4 was the least 'difficult' (and 68 per cent said they would call the police at this stage). However, Items 1 and 2 were of similar 'difficulty'—that is, respondents were not more likely to say they would call the police at the second compared with the first stage (26 per cent responded yes to Item 1, and 24 per cent to Item 2). However, Item 3 did perform as expected, falling between Items 1 and 2 and Item 4.

The items created from the two scenarios seem, therefore, to be tapping into latent traits that represent the propensity to call the police in the types of situations described. We extracted

Table 2. Man in Street scenario: results from one-parameter IRT model

	Difficulty	Std. err.	*p*
Item 1	0.108	0.041	.009
Item 2	−0.995	0.043	<.0005
Item 3	−1.977	0.072	<.0005

Log likelihood = −1,750.61
n = 1,484

Table 3. Family in Trouble scenario: results from one-parameter IRT model

	Difficulty	Std. err.	*p*
Item 1	0.755	0.044	<.0005
Item 2	0.833	0.045	<.0005
Item 3	0.184	0.038	<.0005
Item 4	−0.549	0.042	<.0005

Log likelihood = −2,976.58
n = 1,484

individual scores on these latent traits using the *predict* function in Stata—high scores on these variables indicate that the respondent had a stronger propensity to call the police (or, to put it another way, was more likely to answer 'yes' to calling the police in the less serious situations). These two variables, *Man in Street* and *Family in Trouble,* constitute the dependent variables in our analysis.

Independent variables

We have six main independent variables. Five are represented by scales constructed via Confirmatory Factor Analysis in the statistical package Mplus 7.2. *Trust in the police* was measured by three items derived from Hamm and colleagues (2017) (with responses on a 5-point agree/disagree scale), including 'I am comfortable allowing the police to decide how to deal with problems of crime and disorder'. *Worry about crime* was measured by seven items asking respondents 'how worried' they were about falling victim to crimes like burglary/theft by housebreaking, mugging/robbery and fraud (with responses on a 4-point scale ranging from 'not at all worried' to 'very worried'). *Tolerance of uncertainty* was measured by six items taken from Carleton *et al.* (2007), including: 'When I am uncertain, I can't function very well'. *Civic engagement* was measured by three items probing whether respondents have participated in various forms of public or political life in the last 12 months (with binary yes/no responses), including: 'Attended a public meeting or rally, taken part in a public demonstration or protest'. Finally, *authoritarian attitudes* were measured by six items adapted from the British Social Attitudes survey (BSA 2023) and other sources, including: 'People today don't have enough respect for traditional British values'.[7]

Table A1 shows results from a 5-factor model with the latent variables and observed indicators specified above (all observed indicators were set to categorical, and there were no cross-loadings). Full Information Maximum Likelihood Estimation was used, meaning cases with some missing values were retained in the analysis. Fit statistics were adequate, factor loadings were all over 0.4 and item R^2 values were generally high, so we extracted the five factors for further analysis. A correlation matrix and descriptive statistics for the scales used in the analysis are shown in Table A2.

The sixth and last independent variable is crime *victimization*, which is represented by a simple dummy variable, coded one if the respondent reported they had been a victim of crime in the previous 12 months (9 per cent reported this was the case). See Table A2 for descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix for the dependent and independent variables.

Control variables

We include a number of control variables. These are *age*, entered as a continuous variable; *sex*, a dummy variable coded 1 for female and 0 for male (nine respondents said they identified in another way, and were included in the reference category); *ethnicity*, represented by dummy variables indicating whether the respondent was from an Asian, Black or other ethnic group (with White as the reference category); *economic precarity*, the mean of two items that asked respondents how well they were managing on their present income and whether they would be able to borrow money if they needed it; a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent had a limiting *disability*; and the IMD decile of their LSOA of residence.[8]

[7] For full item wordings, see Table A1.

[8] The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is a measure of neighbourhood deprivation. Lower Layer Super Output Area (LSOA) is a census-based small area classification (in England and Wales LSOAs have a resident population ranging from 1,000 to 3,000 people). An LSOA in the first decile of the IMD is one of the 10 per cent most deprived areas in the country.

RESULTS

The IRT models we estimated were used to predict two continuous dependent variables. We therefore estimated two linear regression models with *Man in Street* and *Family in Trouble as the dependent variables*. Results are shown in Table 4.[9]

Looking at Table 4, we find, first, that those with more trust in the police have a greater propensity to call police and involve them in the types of situations described in the scenarios (H1 supported). Second, we find mixed support for the idea that people less tolerant of risk and uncertainty, and/or for whom the risk of crime is more salient, are more likely to say they would call the police. H2, which proposed that those more worried about crime will be more willing to invoke the police, was supported. However, we did not find that recent victims of crime are more likely to call police, nor that those less tolerant of uncertainty would be more willing to invoke the police (H3 and H4 not supported). Third, we find that those more engaged in civic life seem

Table 4. Results from two linear regression models predicting propensities to call the police

	Man in Street		**Family in Trouble**	
	b	**SE (*b*)**	***b***	**SE (*b*)**
Age	0.006***	0.001	−0.002	0.001
Sex (ref: male)				
Female	−0.069+	0.041	−0.066	0.043
Ethic group (ref: White)				
Asian	0.182*	0.08	0.308***	0.086
Black	0.137	0.108	0.121	0.115
Other	−0.034	0.089	0.192*	0.095
Limiting disability (ref: no)				
Yes	−0.077	0.052	−0.04	0.055
Economic precarity (high = more)	−0.073*	0.035	0.037	0.037
IMD decile (high = less deprived)	0.023**	0.007	0.004	0.008
Victim of crime (ref: no)				
Yes	0.025	0.07	−0.017	0.075
Worry about crime	0.075*	0.032	0.093**	0.035
Tolerance of uncertainty	−0.011	0.035	0.013	0.037
Trust in police	0.136***	0.032	0.107**	0.035
Civic engagement	0.216**	0.083	0.224*	0.089
Authoritarian attitudes	0.213***	0.039	0.294***	0.042
Constant	−0.161	0.125	−0.012	0.133
R-sq	0.098		0.079	
N	1463		1463	

+$p < .1$,
*$p < .05$,
**$p < .01$,
***$p < .001$.

[9] Tests for collinearity and heteroskedasticity indicated no issues with either model.

more ready to call the police (H5 supported). Finally, we find that individuals with more authoritarian attitudes are more likely to say they would invoke the police (H6 supported).

Results in relation to our main explanatory variables were consistent across the two models. Results in relation to our control variables were less so. Perhaps the main difference is that older people, those in less economically precarious positions and those living in richer areas had a greater propensity to call the police in the *Man in Street* but not in the *Family in Trouble* scenario. One interpretation of these findings may be that younger people, and those living in less well-off areas (and who are less well-off themselves), may be more accepting and/or simply more accustomed to public 'rowdiness', dampening their propensity to summon the police to do something about it.

DISCUSSION

Despite some group-based and individual differences, there was a broad consensus among participants in both our qualitative and quantitative studies that potentially vulnerable people presenting imminent risk to the safety of themselves or others warrant a police response. Socio-cultural associations with social order, and the capacity to resolve situations by force, positions police as uniquely placed to respond urgently to restore safety, if only in the short-term. Beyond this initial response, there was also broad agreement that police intervention with vulnerable people should be circumscribed, with cases subsequently referred to other more appropriate support agencies.

It is clear from the survey that those with more trust in the police have a greater propensity to call and involve them in situations of unfolding uncertainty and risk. Focus groups participants also often cited issues of trust, confidence and the quality of relations and interactions with police as vital factors informing their judgements. Yet, both the focus group and survey findings suggest that when thinking about calling the police people attend as much or more to situation and context. Questions of trust can be superseded by concerns about crime, risk and safety, which people feel the police are uniquely equipped to deal with. This aligns with Bell's (2016) conclusion that legal cynicism does not necessarily preclude reliance on police in moments of immediate risk: public 'cooperation' does not arise solely from relations with police but is a situationally activated practice shaped by necessity and immediacy.

Our findings suggest that while public willingness to invoke police is heavily influenced by (positive and negative) direct and vicarious experiences, public expectations of policing as a resource to regain control and resolve problematic situations can be situationally grounded and explained. Paradoxically, trust and distrust can coexist in situationally contingent ways. Similarly, people may trust individual officers and invest in their ability, benevolence and integrity but also distrust police in general, and as an institution.

For many participants calling the police functioned as a form of triage: an initial protective step taken with the expectation that officers would contain risk and then refer on to more appropriate agencies. This comes close to Bell's (2016: 335–7) strategic repertoire of 'institutional navigation', whereby the police may be called upon as a readily available gateway to access wider social welfare or health services for vulnerable people in crisis. However, many focus group respondents were acutely aware that invoking police can also serve to undermine welfare or needs-based responses where police prioritize coercion and prosecution over problem-solving or harm prevention. Some participants expressed reluctance to summon officers in higher-risk situations, citing concerns that they may escalate events and compound rather than mitigate vulnerabilities.

Given such calls for assistance have grown in the post-austerity era, questions about the appropriateness of police responses to vulnerable people and the skills officers bring to these encounters have become increasingly salient. This is particularly so in England and Wales, where the police workforce—in light of the recent uplift after a decade of declining officer numbers—is both

younger and less experienced than in previous decades (Home Office 2024). Resource constraints and the availability of services also influenced some participants' thinking. Some said they would call the police because they were the only available service, despite feeling that the police may not be the most appropriate responder. In other cases, awareness of stretched resources discouraged people from calling the police, even where they felt that officers *ought* to be responding.

Nonetheless, there was broad consensus among our participants that incidents involving people with addiction, safeguarding, domestic abuse and related issues where no immediate risks were present nor crime committed required services other than the police. Police were, in general, seen to be required only in cases of imminent danger, risk and uncertainty, and then only briefly. This seems to accord with attempts to reduce the police footprint where possible, and the principles of *Right Care, Right Person*. Yet, the difficulty in confidently knowing when the availability of force might be necessary and how incidents will develop or escalate renders such judgements precarious and uncertain. They are being made, moreover, in a context where other service providers have often withdrawn, something our focus group participants frequently noted. This combination of uncertainty and the paucity of other services seemed to 'push' people towards the police.

Mirroring other studies demonstrating neighbourhood variations in response to problematic events (Sampson *et al.* 1997), the salience of place and a sense of engagement and belonging within a particular locality also informed people's thinking. Those who engaged more in their community were more likely to say they would call police. Situational reasoning operates within broader contexts that shape thresholds of tolerance and trust. While neighbourhoods where local social order is lacking are more likely to host incidents invoking vulnerability and potentially harmful activity, they may also be places where people are more reluctant to call for police intervention, because such incidents are normalized aspects of everyday life, or because they lack trust in police to respond appropriately. Conversely, those in more affluent neighbourhoods with greater social cohesion and lower levels of disorderly conduct may be more likely to call on police. Here, thresholds of tolerance may be lower due to a relative absence or infrequency of disorderly or problematic behaviour.

Neighbourhood features can thus serve to 'define deviancy down' or 'define deviancy up'. Shared thresholds of tolerance influence residents' propensities to call police, with people living in different areas responding to similar situations in different ways. Moreover, across both data sets it seems clear that people with more authoritarian mindsets were more ready to 'define deviancy up'—to identify particular behaviours as troubling and worthy of intervention—and to and invoke the police as symbols and enactors of social order.

Decisions on whether to summon officers thus emerge from a dynamic and interactive process that has personal, situational, contextual, relational and institutional dimensions. People draw upon wider cultural frames, their sense of identity and belonging as well as sometimes deeply engrained experiences of (dis)trust in forming judgements. But so too, at a micro-level, they assess situations to determine whether they warrant strategic intervention by police. In so doing, they consider their own needs for safety and reassurance, the nature of the situation, who is most appropriate but also available to respond immediately and decisively and whether police officers can be trusted to deliver an effective and legitimate response. These somewhat paradoxical dynamics play out variably across time, place and situation. As a result, engrained sentiments of trust or distrust can be suspended and replaced by strategic, circumstantial and context-specific occasions of 'situational (dis)trust'.

All this would seem to position police at the intersection of multiple and sometimes conflicting desires, aims and practices. The police are symbols of and a primary mechanism for social control. Viewed from some perspectives, to exert order under heightened conditions of uncertainty is *ipso facto* to call the police. Positive (trust-based) relationships with police increase peoples' propensities to summon them, but so do other individual, community and socio-structural factors. People therefore

turn to police for a wide variety of reasons—indeed, police presence as we have imagined it here appears over-determined, an effect of multiple causes any one of which might be individually sufficient.

However, police are not the primary initiators of the processes of social control. Rather, they work at the margins where the usual processes of community control and prevention have broken down, a small but important element within a much larger, complex network of controls. The situations to which police respond frequently reflect and arise from wider structural inequalities, institutional failings and social or personal crises, and only some of these are expressed in problematic, disorderly or criminal behaviour. Police are called to regulate uncertain and risky situations but, in so doing, they are positioned at a broader level as 'the responsible custodians of institutional breakdown' (Thacher 2022: 64). As such, they have a role both in protecting individuals and communities from further harm and bringing order to bear in the short-term, and in wider community problem-solving through partnerships with other local agencies in identifying and mitigating the consequences of wider societal crises and institutional failings.

From the perspective of the public 'calling the police' is above all a problem-solving strategy. Police presence is invoked when people perceive force may be needed to achieve desired outcomes of restoring order. Participants generally said they felt more reassured by a police response than agencies without the ultimate capacity to coerce, control and apprehend. But they also recognized the harm that police responses can cause and felt other agencies should step in once imminent danger has abated and control of situations regained. There were concerns of over-reliance by police on their coercive powers. The defining attribute of police, to impose and distribute physical force and issue non-negotiable commands, is also a source of public criticism and opprobrium. Participants seemed to grasp that police can, inadvertently or otherwise, exacerbate the harms they have been summoned to address or generate new ones. The challenge for police in resolving neighbourhood problems is to retain recourse to force while seeking to avoid its use and, where called upon to use it, to do so parsimoniously in problem-solving endeavours that engage with other actors to secure longer-term solutions.

Finally, our findings reinforce the idea that police are expected—here, by the public—to act at different times as social workers, mental health professionals and/or nurses, even recognizing that their available resources are typically coercive and incident focused, and their subject-specific skills and knowledge limited. However, it would be wrong to assume that police officers are called upon to engage with vulnerable and troubled people simply because in the public's mind social workers, mental health professionals or others are unavailable, unable or unwilling to provide their services urgently. While this may well hold true under certain circumstances, more fundamentally, people are aware that some of the exigencies of problematic situations demand the potential for coercion. They necessitate immediate and unquestioned intervention.

CONCLUSIONS

The study identifies expectations among members of the public over when and under what circumstances they should 'call the police' to handle social problems and manage problematic situations—notably those involving risk of harm. Though there are differences in risk and associated intervention thresholds, unpredictability and threat of harm appear key factors informing decisions to call the police. Presenting members of the public with scenarios of escalating seriousness, our research found that decisions to call the police are primarily influenced by the exigencies of the situation. The question of institutional trust is certainly relevant but can be superseded by safety concerns and the police's capacity to resolve situations urgently. In this respect, police appear to be symbols of guardianship and protection that can be called upon strategically to restore social order and engender security, even in the face of engrained experiences of distrust in the police, cynicism and low expectations.

Conceptually, the study extends Bell's (2016) notion of 'situational trust' beyond her case study of a highly marginalized group in the US context, suggesting that British publics also make contingent, pragmatic judgements about police involvement under conditions of uncertainty. By embedding situational reasoning within analyses of vulnerability, austerity and institutional withdrawal, our findings contribute to international debates on the boundaries of police legitimacy and the conditions under which cooperation is elicited despite cynicism. This situational perspective helps to clarify why people who express low trust in the police nevertheless invoke them when crises unfold, and why legitimacy may be locally restored in moments of perceived necessity.

An obvious limitation in this study is that it reports on what people say they would do in hypothetical situations; it does not account for what they actually do in the real world. Nonetheless, we do know that the scenarios presented and discussed are precisely the kinds of incidents to which police are called on a routine basis. Furthermore, focus group participants and, we assume, respondents to the national survey often had direct encounters with such everyday police incidents, and connected their expectations to their lived experiences.

Our findings highlight a broad consensus as to the expectations and boundaries of police intervention in such cases. There was strong agreement that the role of the police is to respond promptly, assess incidents, bring them under control and, once risk of harm had dissipated and safety restored, refer individuals or cases on to more appropriate specialist care and support agencies. As such, there was recognition of the bounded limits to the role of police (Trinkner *et al.* 2018; Crawford 2024). Responding to scenarios invoking vulnerability prompted participants to outline a relatively narrow police remit in which frontline officers perform the basics of response and problem-solving well, in ways that are fair and procedurally just. As a corollary to this, while situations of high risk could overshadow questions of trust, there were cases where lack of trust was such that even where danger thresholds had been met some participants were reluctant to call the police for fear they might exacerbate problems. For some, distrust was such that they were minded not to invoke the police or indeed any other intervention. Given the potential for harm to arise in such situations, and the interests of community safety, such viewpoints are disconcerting.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All named authors contributed to the conception of the study and the development of the methodology. D.R. and C.A.W. led on the focus group fieldwork and data collection. B.B. took the lead on the national survey. A.C. secured the funding for the research. All authors contributed to the framing of the paper, the analysis and writing of the article and all approved the final manuscript.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None declared.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis: results from a five-factor solution with no cross-loadings

	Std. factor loading	Item *R*-sq
Worry about crime		
Burglary/theft by housebreaking	0.77	0.59
Mugging/robbery	0.93	0.87
A violent crime	0.92	0.85
Fraud/scam (online or offline)	0.55	0.30
Other online crime	0.58	0.33
Hate crime	0.71	0.50
Sexual crime	0.70	0.49
Tolerance of uncertainty		
Unforeseen events upset me greatly	0.69	0.48
It frustrates me not having all the information I need	0.53	0.29
I always want to know what the future has in store for me	0.67	0.45
I can't stand being taken by surprise	0.74	0.55
When I am uncertain I can't function very well	0.83	0.68
When it's time to act, uncertainty paralyses me	0.74	0.55
Trust in police		
I am comfortable allowing the police to decide how to deal with problems of crime and disorder	0.78	0.60
If I was a victim of a violent crime, I would be content to let the police deal with the matter	0.83	0.69
I am happy to accept the ability of the police to intervene in people's lives	0.79	0.62
Civic engagement		
Contacted a local official such as a local councillor, MP, government official, mayor, or public official working for the local council (not for personal reasons, e.g. housing repairs)	0.48	0.23

Table A1. Continued

	Std. factor loading	Item *R*-sq
Attended a public meeting or rally, taken part in a public demonstration or protest	0.79	0.62
Signed a paper petition or an online/e-petition	0.65	0.42
Authoritarian attitudes		
People today don't have enough respect for traditional British values	0.81	0.65
Lots of internet sites should be banned	0.52	0.28
It is a human right to be allowed to protest against the government	−0.43	0.18
People in Britain should be more tolerant of those who lead different lifestyles	−0.41	0.17
People who break the law should be given tougher sentences	0.70	0.49
There should be fewer immigrants in this country	0.73	0.53
Model fit		
Chi-square	1439.1	
Degrees of freedom	264	
p-value	<.0005	
RMSEA	0.05	
CFI	0.97	
TLI	0.96	
SRMR	0.05	

Table A2. Latent variables: descriptives and correlation matrix

	Mean	Std. dev.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Man in Street (1)	−0.01	0.80	1						
Family in Trouble (2)	0.00	0.85	0.30	1					
Worry about crime (3)	0.00	0.71	0.08	0.15	1				
Tolerance of uncertainty (4)	0.00	0.63	0.00	0.07	0.31	1			
Authoritarian attitudes (5)	−0.01	0.70	0.20	0.21	0.28	0.15	1		
Trust in police (6)	0.00	0.68	0.14	0.07	−0.14	−0.04	0.20	1	
Civic engagement (7)	0.02	0.32	−0.07	−0.07	0.00	0.01	−0.57	−0.36	1