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Vulnerability and policing: The views of service providers and users

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Vulnerability has become a prominent focus of social policy interventions with police now playing a leading role in street-level governance of the concept through multi-agency working. Yet, we still know little about how vulnerability is operationalized and experienced on the ground. This article employs Q methodology to explore the views of frontline service providers and users on how vulnerability is mobilized in policing settings. We identify three distinct viewpoints and areas of cross-viewpoint consensus that together reveal a tension between the conceptual promise of vulnerability and the realities of its operationalization. We conceptualize this dynamic through the lens of boundary objects, showing how vulnerability simultaneously enables coordination and reproduces power asymmetries, highlighting its transformative but contested potential.

Keywords policing, vulnerability, Q methodology, multi-agency working, boundary object, care-control

Introduction

The concept of vulnerability has become a prominent framing and focus of police-led partnerships with a wide range of public and third sector organizations. Although widely used in both policing and social policy, it is often interpreted differently while the implications for its practical application remain underexplored. The burgeoning literature on

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the operationalization of vulnerability tends to focus on particular policy domains and select policing issues, with limited attention to the cross-domain dynamics of how ideas of vulnerability play out on the ground. Through exploring perspectives on the role and value of vulnerability as a shared frame in multi-agency responses to harm, this paper advances understanding of how it is used as an organizing concept in policing and related contexts.

It does so by employing Q methodology (Watts and Stenner 2012) as a mixed-method approach to explore the views of diverse groups of frontline police officers, related service providers, and 'service users' to identify and compare patterns in how different viewpoints are shared across participants. Particular attention will be paid to the prominent role occupied by police in multi-agency settings, as after over a decade of sustained austerity, police officers more frequently interact with vulnerable people, often in collaboration with other services (VKPP 2025). This reflects a broader reconfiguration of the state's care and control functions under austerity, whereby local actors, notably the police, are tasked with managing the consequences of a hollowed-out welfare system often with constrained mandates and structural capacity to provide long-term support alongside longstanding systemic injustices like institutional racism.

Influenced by Gilson's (2021) understanding of vulnerability as an openness to being affected, that includes, but is not reducible to, a propensity to harm, this paper is concerned with how openness to harm becomes institutionally operationalized. This framing enables us to recognize that vulnerability is not a neutral condition, but one that is produced and distributed through socio-historical conditions as well as relationships and human agency (Gilson 2016). When operationalized it becomes entangled in a confluence of care and control, where interventions can be simultaneously supportive, punitive and exclusionary (Brown 2015). Moreover, these pressures are intensified in the context of longstanding austerity politics and welfare retrenchment in capitalist economies (Farnsworth and Irving 2015), often leading to inadequate responses from overburdened systems or justifying 'selective and partial assistance' (Sözer 2020: 15).

Using the Q methodology approach, this paper reveals three distinct viewpoints concerning how 'vulnerability' is mobilized in the work of policing-led multi-agency partnerships and the experiences thereof. While the first is 'optimistic' on the conceptual value of vulnerability as a focal point to coordinate responses to harm, the second ('sceptical') and the third ('ambivalent') viewpoints raise vital concerns about the ways it is currently translated into practice. Through identifying clusters of consensus and fault lines of disagreement on policing vulnerability, the paper aims to advance our understanding of how vulnerability is operationalized within a landscape of increasingly constrained service provision and the experiences thereof. Drawing on viewpoints shared across frontline actors and service users, this paper offers insights and cautionary warnings informed by deploying vulnerability as a 'boundary object' (Star and Griesemer 1989) in inter-organizational relations that enables collaborative work across different professional and social worlds in the absence of consensus.

While Q methodology has been increasingly used in healthcare research (Churruca *et al.* 2021; Duncan Millar *et al.* 2022) and public administration scholarship (Warsen *et al.* 2020), to date, criminological engagement with it remains sparse (cf Barker *et al.* 2022; Svolkinas *et al.* 2023). Here, we demonstrate the potential of Q methods for criminological inquiry, especially in investigating contested concepts like vulnerability in policing contexts; revealing

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both diversity and congruence within apparently homogenous debates, while affording opportunities for replicability across time and place.[1]

Care and control in policing vulnerability

From its inception, policing in the UK has been as much about managing structural issues (e.g. poverty, moral disorder, rehabilitation of offenders), as enforcing the law. Colquhoun (1796) envisioned the 'new' police as part of a moral and social order project, blending welfare provision with discipline and surveillance. As Neocleous (2000: 721) argues, policing has long been intertwined with social policy; and social workers, probation officers, and administrators have always been integral to the broader policing apparatus. Likewise, social policy has always had a strong disciplinary and controlling dimension through its functions in regulating the poor and the dangerous classes in society (Hughes *et al.* 2007: 216).

This entanglement of welfare and control has long been shaped by the values, ideas and beliefs of frontline workers in their interactions with vulnerable people, publics and service users (Lipsky 1980; Rutherford 1993). More recently, Zacka highlights how 'much of the routine of street level work involves negotiating difficult compromises between these normative desiderata' (2017: 22). Empirical studies of the operationalization of vulnerability in local service provision also demonstrate the centrality of normative elements and discretion, with frontline actors using vulnerability variously to respond to specific situations and personal circumstances of the people with whom they interact; playing out differently for different service users according to factors such as age, gender, race, ethnicity and compliance with expected norms (Brown 2015). In the context of regulatory interventions such as policing, this inevitably involves the techniques service providers use to manage, contain, control and persuade vulnerable people –involving a blend of strategies of support, conditionality and control.

Against this backdrop, vulnerability has emerged as a key organizing principle in contemporary UK policing, promoted through the National Vulnerability Action Plan (NPCC 2023) and the VKPP's 2025 Strategy. It is also central to Police Scotland's 2030 Vision, which emphasizes public health and trauma-informed practices (Police Scotland 2024). Despite a recent shift in tone towards a more diffuse and cross-cutting approach within the 2023-2025 PEEL Assessment Framework (HMICFRS 2023), vulnerability focus has been retained, motivating joint and 'holistic approaches' to tackle the root causes of crime and early intervention at the strategic level (NPCC 2023: 2). Vulnerability therefore increasingly serves as a 'cross-agency language used to describe and make sense of crime' (Menichelli 2020: 53), brokering the convergence of welfare and control.

Definitions of vulnerability remain notoriously amorphous across policy and practice (Brown *et al.* 2017) and policing is no exception (Keay and Kirby 2018). The College of Policing's widely adopted definition describes vulnerability as a condition where, as a result of one's situation or circumstances, a person is 'unable to take care of or protect themselves or others from harm or exploitation' (NPCC 2023: 5). This definition nestles 'personal' characteristics (including age, gender, disability, ethnicity) within wider 'situational' factors (e.g. poverty, adverse family circumstances, third-party exploitation). Given the wide array of interconnected factors implied, but not-specified, vulnerability opens vast discretionary space in policing (Menichelli 2021).

[1] To this end, we provide open access resources that detail the full methodological approach, implementation processes and data analysis which are available at https://vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/q-methods-study-of-vulnerability-resources/

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This discretion increasingly tilts toward a responsibilising logic. As assistance has become an individualized rather than a social problem, professionals are encouraged to adopt a 'moralizing lens of personal inadequacy' to monitor and modify behaviour (Rodgers 2008). Consequently, those in need are framed more as a burden on the state and society, becoming key targets of increasingly prominent multi-agency partnerships. Amid the deepening austerity politics, therefore, vulnerability may operate as a governance tool for rationing services and delineating entitlement (Brown 2015).

In this context, vulnerability narratives may enable coercive or disciplinary action under the guise of care, particularly toward marginalized communities. In policing, this manifests in interventions that blend support with surveillance and control. Even when framed as safeguarding, policies targeting sex work (Grenfell *et al.* 2023), criminal exploitation (Koch *et al.* 2024), or radicalization (Heath-Kelly 2017) risk reinforcing criminalization through ostensibly protective practices. This makes it more urgent to explore how the concept of vulnerability is operationalized in policing and related contexts and how these are experienced in practice.

Despite being problematic, seminal work on policing vulnerability argues that the 'ambiguity and ambivalence' of vulnerability can give rise to potentially progressive forms of action (Aliverti 2020; Brown *et al.* 2025). For Aliverti (2020), efforts of mainstreaming vulnerability in criminal justice represent 'profound changes *at the heart* of the state' (p. 1120, original emphasis) and express 'contemporaneous punitive and humanitarian turns' (p. 1117). It challenges foundational binaries between victim and offender in the criminal justice system (Munro and Scoular 2012), opening space for more contextual understandings of crime. In doing so, the concept blurs—and potentially further advances—the long-standing tension between care and control in policing (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron 2021).

Drawing on this body of scholarship, this paper traces the potential of vulnerability to operate as a *boundary object* (Star and Griesemer 1989), an object or concept inhabiting multiple and intersecting social worlds, allowing different professional or lay groups—police, practitioners and public—to work collaboratively without consensus. This paper identifies and examines viewpoints of frontline service providers and service users about how vulnerability is operationalized and experienced on the ground. Building on insights from distinct viewpoints on the role and value of vulnerability as operationalized in policing settings, the paper reveals the tension between its conceptual appeal and translations on the ground, exploring pathways to address the gap between the two.

Q study and methods

Developed by William Stephenson in the 1930s, Q methodology studies subjectivity–understood as subjective opinions, values or beliefs. Based on the idea that many diverse opinions exist but people's views tend to cluster into shared perspectives, Q methodology allows researchers to identify consensus and disagreement on a given topic (Watts and Stenner 2012). By providing a detailed 'snapshot' of diverse perspectives, it uncovers subjectivity within debates, which might otherwise superficially seem uncontested or purely technical.

A Q study entails four key elements. First, a 'concourse' of statements is constructed to capture the diversity of viewpoints on a particular topic (Q-set). Second, participants rank these statements on a quasi-normal distribution grid (an inverted bell-curve), based on level of agreement and disagreement, creating a fixed distribution of statements known as the 'Q-Sort'. This can be supplemented by an interview where participants elaborate on their rankings. Third, factor analysis identifies clusters of shared viewpoints, which are then interpreted alongside the interview data. Each factor represents a group of participants who

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rank statements in a similar fashion and thus hold a shared perspective. The interpretation process also involves identifying distinguishing statements, those ranked significantly differently across factors, and consensus statements that indicate agreement across viewpoints. Participants (the P-Set) are purposively sampled to capture a diverse range of viewpoints, rather than to achieve statistical representativeness (Watts and Stenner 2012: 4).

To construct the Q-set, we conducted a scoping review to compile the 'universe of verbalizations' (Stephenson 1986) on the impacts of 'vulnerability' as a frame for policing and public service provision. Drawing on 1,570 sources, including academic literature across three databases,[2] mainstream media and recent policy documents, we extracted 398 statements, which were refined to a final set of 44 following piloting (see Table 1). This number aligns with guidance recommending 40–60 statements for Q studies (Watts and Stenner 2012). In line with best practice, some statements were intentionally provocative to prompt reflection on polarizing ideas.[3]

Before each Q-Sort, all participants were given verbal instructions and a video overview outlining the task, and specifically the absence of 'right' or 'wrong' answers. Participants then ranked all 44 statements on a nine-point scale from 'most disagree' to 'most agree', using a forced distribution shaped as an inverted bell curve (two extreme statements, increasing to eight in the centre) (see Figure 1).

Each Q-sort was followed by a semi-structured interview exploring: (1) participants' rationales for their selection of the four statements they placed at the two extremes; (2) responses to three 'signal' statements (see footnote 3) selected to prompt deeper reflections on the term 'vulnerability' and its application; and (3) views on the role the police should play in responding to it. We also collected demographic data on each participant,[4] as well as information about their experience of interaction with the police and partner services to help contextualize the analysis.

Q-Sorts were analysed using KenQ software, initially identifying eight factors,[5] based on intercorrelations in statement rankings. Following the robustness criteria recommended by Watts and Stenner (2012), we retained three dominant factors (see Figure 2). First, only those factors with an eigenvalue[6] >1 were kept. Second, each factor had to have at least two participants that strongly matched it. This is known as 'significant factor loading'. Third, we applied the Humphrey's Rule, requiring the cross-product of the two highest loadings to exceed twice the standard error, ensuring stability. Of the 61 Q-Sorts, 57 were retained for interpretation, as three did not load significantly on any factor, and one loaded in a bipolar fashion (i.e. expressing the inverse of Factor 2).

The final three factors explained 26%, 9%, and 6% of the variance respectively, accounting for 41% of the cumulative variance after rotation (see Figure 2). Idealized Q-sorts (i.e. mathematical composites of each factor) were generated to visualize the relative position of each statement. The factor analysis was triangulated and interpreted in light of the qualitative interview data. All the interview data were analysed using direct content analysis, with coding structured around the participants' responses to their Q-sort placements.

[2] The research utilised the Web of Science, ProQuest and Science Direct databases. Search strings were: 'vulnerability and policing'/'vulnerable and police'/'vulnerable and policing'/'vulnerability and police'.

[3] All the project resources are available via the project website: https://vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/q-methods-study-of-vulnerability-resources/

[4] Ethnicity data were collected using categories adapted from the UK Census to ensure consistency and comparability.

[5] Dr Linas Svolkinas provided valuable assistance and confidence to the team in supporting the factor analysis and statistical test.

[6] Eigenvalues show how much variation each factor explains.

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Table 1 Statements

1. 'Bad girls' aren't seen as vulnerable
2. Police officers are particularly vulnerable given the dangers they are exposed to
3. People are often more fearful of social workers than police officers
4. Sharing personal information between public services can further harm vulnerable people
5. Even some terrorists should be regarded as vulnerable
6. Partnerships between police and social services will be dominated by the police
7. It's a good thing that policing is now more focused on vulnerability
8. Many vulnerable victims never come to the attention of public services
9. The police spend too much time investigating hate crimes
10. Vulnerable people do not trust public services to protect them
11. Vulnerability is another word for those who are socially disadvantaged
12. A perpetrator's vulnerability is not important when a serious crime has been committed
13. The police treat everyone equally regardless of race and ethnicity
14. Local charities do a better job at supporting vulnerable people than public services
15. Calling someone vulnerable is offensive
16. Diverting resources from the police to public health and other services would better support vulnerable people
17. Public services are institutionally racist (not just the Police)
18. The criminal justice system does a good job of serving vulnerable people
19. The police have gone too soft in recent years
20. Organizations fail vulnerable people because they lack funding
21. Prioritizing certain groups based on their vulnerability is the right thing to do
22. For most vulnerable people, the police are the problem, not the solution
23. The police fail to protect some vulnerable people because of institutional racism
24. It is unfair when service providers decide who is vulnerable and who isn't
25. The police are in a good position to help vulnerable people
26. Arresting vulnerable people can sometimes help them
27. Even when people have experienced trauma, they need to take responsibility for their own actions
28. The police are one of the few public services that can actually help people trapped in abusive relationships.
29. Public services need to be able to share personal information about their service users more freely
30. 'Vulnerability' is a term that helps different service providers to work better together
31. Young offenders should be seen as children first, offenders second
32. Vulnerable people often don't see themselves as vulnerable
33. The police should be left alone to do their job

(Continued)

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Table 1 Continued

34. The police should focus on catching criminals, not helping vulnerable people
35. Men hide their vulnerabilities
36. The police should focus on improving young people's difficult lives when dealing with gangs
37. Vulnerable people who refuse to engage should never be forced to accept help
38. Focusing on vulnerability draws attention away from issues of poverty and inequality
39. The behaviour of victims is often a barrier to police investigations
40. It's routine practice for Police to abuse vulnerable people
41. We should all be treated as vulnerable
42. Vulnerability is a meaningless term
43. The police should stop acting like social workers
44. More attention should be given to preventing online abuse

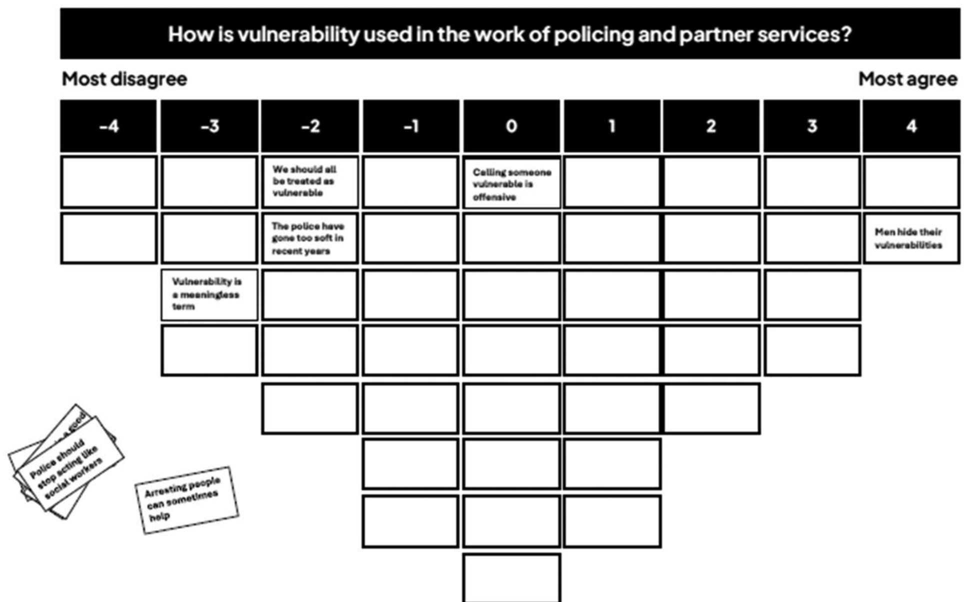

Fig. 1 Q sort used in this study

Data were collected from 61 participants drawn from three broad groups:

18 *frontline police officers (POs) and PCSOs.*
18 *service providers (SPs) engaged in harm prevention and community safety from sectors including housing, health, education, community organizations and drug services.*
25 *service users (SUs), who were members of the public with experiences of accessing local services and/or policing interactions, recruited through NGO partners (see* Table 2*).*

Interviews were conducted in late 2023 and early 2024 in Bradford, a post-industrial city in northern England. With a population of over half a million. Bradford has undergone

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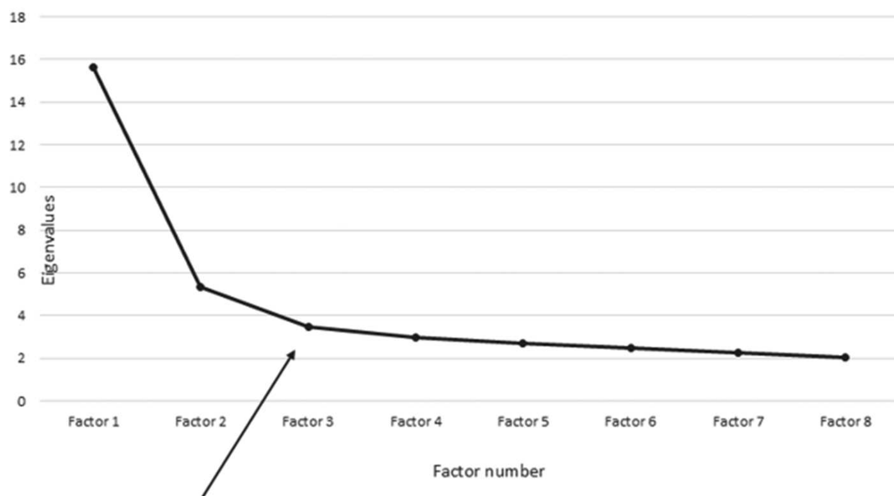

Only the first 3 factors explain the majority of the variance.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8
Eigenvalues	15.6328	5.3268	3.4762	2.9595	2.708	2.4558	2.2578	2.0535
% explained variance	26	9	6	5	4	4	4	3
Cumulative % explained variance	26	35	41	46	50	54	58	61

Fig. 2 Factor analysis

Table 2 Sample demographics

	All participants (n = 61)	Service users only (n = 25)
Average age	37.7 years	34.1 years
Women	57% (35)	64% (16)
Racially minoritized (%)	33% (20)	40% (10)
Working full time (%)	61% (37)	20% (5)
Disability	16% (10)	20% (5)
Any police interaction (%)	–	80% (20)
Police interaction as a suspect (%)	–	36% (9)
Police contact in last 12 months (%)	–	24% (6)
Police contact more than once a year	–	24% (6)

significant economic restructuring since the late 20th century, leaving a legacy of deindustrialization, entrenched poverty, and spatially concentrated disadvantage. Today, it remains one of the most deprived local authorities in the UK, alongside significant demographic diversity including large South Asian, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern diasporas. These dynamics are compounded by histories of racialization and uneven investment in local infrastructure and services. At the same time Bradford's local institutional landscape is defined by longstanding efforts to implement a multi-agency approach

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to public safety and wellbeing,[7] including a growing emphasis on whole-system public health interventions (Engelmann *et al.* 2024), and a world-renowned hub of longitudinal health and wellbeing research, the Born in Bradford study.[8] In 2025 Bradford was the UK City of Culture, securing inward investment. However, these efforts are constrained by concentrated deprivation, high levels of need, racialization and a legacy of mistrust in state-community relations. Thus, Bradford offers a compelling case for exploring how national rollout of vulnerability agendas are implemented and experienced on the ground.

It is important to note that findings derived from Q methodology are not statistically representative of broader populations. Unlike quantitative methodologies, Q methodology focuses on identifying and understanding a variety of perspectives, rather than their prevalence or distribution across particular populations, prioritizing depth of interpretation over representative breadth. By revealing both disagreements and consensus, our study offers rich insights into the gaps between vulnerability as a concept and its operationalizations and experiences on the ground. We focused deliberately on people living and working in the city of Bradford, a post-industrial urban centre marked by high levels of deprivation, demographic complexity, and a complex ecosystem of public service responses to vulnerability under pressures of longstanding austerity and increasing need. These territorialized politics of governing marginalization are likely to influence—obliquely or otherwise—people's opinions, beliefs and subjectivities. It shows the strength of Q methodology in highlighting complexity of viewpoints within specific settings and the possible relationship between those perspectives and the settings in which they emerge. Although our analysis is grounded in a specific place, the structural pressures shaping these viewpoints resonate across a wider geography of de-industrialized urban conurbations in the UK and beyond.

Findings: Viewpoints on vulnerability and policing

The three distinct viewpoints are summarized below, followed by consideration of the cross-cutting convergent themes.

Viewpoint 1: Optimistic about a vulnerability focus

Viewpoint 1 largely embraces and is optimistic about the renewed focus within policing on vulnerability and public safety endeavours across partner agencies (Figure 3). Vulnerability is viewed as a substantive concept that might help drive better models of policing and enable stronger partnerships between the police and other public services.

Participants positively associated a vulnerability focus with improving inter-agency cooperation, enhancing investigation outcomes and according due consideration to individuals' circumstances such that support can be tailored to needs. Accordingly, this perspective advocated that police should work more closely with other services to identify, assess and support people with vulnerabilities in the course of investigations and day-to-day

[7] In large part, Bradford was selected as the research site as it is the focus of a wider programme of place-based data science research drawing on connected administrative datasets linked to the Born in Bradford study and more qualitative service mapping and community case studies that the ESRC Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre is conducting—see: https://vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/bradford-mapping/and https://vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/connected-data-analytics/.

[8] Born in Bradford is a longitudinal study working with over 30,000 Bradfordians through linking health, education, social care and environmental data to improve public health provisions and prevention efforts—see: https://borninbradford.nhs.uk/

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Composite Q sort for Factor 1

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
** Vulnerability is a meaningless term	The police should focus on catching criminals, not helping	** ◀ Partnerships between police and social services will be dominated by	* ▶ The criminal justice system does a good job of serving vulnerable	Diverting resources from the police to public health and other	** ▶ Even some terrorists should be regarded as vulnerable	** Organisations fail vulnerable people because they lack funding	Men hide their vulnerabilities	** ▶ It's a good thing that policing is now more focused on vulnerability
it's routine practice for Police to abuse vulnerable people	Calling someone vulnerable is offensive	For most vulnerable people, the police are the problem, not	** The police fail to protect some vulnerable people because of	** Even when people have experienced trauma, they need to take	The behaviour of victims is often a barrier to police investigations	** ▶ The police are in a good position to help vulnerable people	Many vulnerable victims never come to the attention of public services	** ▶ Prioritising certain groups based on their vulnerability is the right
	We should all be treated as vulnerable	** ◀ The police should stop acting like social workers	Bad girls' aren't seen as vulnerable	** ▶ Vulnerability is another word for those who are socially disadvantaged	** Vulnerable people do not trust public services to protect them	Arresting vulnerable people can sometimes help them	** ▶ Vulnerability' is a term that helps different service providers to	
	** ◀ Sharing personal information between public services can	The police spend too much time investigating hate crimes	A perpetrator's vulnerability is not important when a serious crime	** ◀ People are often more fearful of social workers than police	More attention should be given to preventing online abuse	Vulnerable people often don't see themselves as vulnerable	* ▶ Young offenders should be seen as children first, offenders	
		Public services are institutionally racist (not just the	* ◀ The police have gone too soft in recent years	** ◀ Police officers are particularly vulnerable given the	The police should focus on improving young people's difficult lives	** ▶ The police are one of the few public services that can actually help		
			** The police should be left alone to do their job	** ◀ Local charities do a better job at supporting vulnerable people than	** ▶ Public services need to be able to share personal information			
			Focusing on vulnerability draws attention away from issues of	* Vulnerable people who refuse to engage should never be forced	It is unfair when service providers decide who is vulnerable and			
				** The police treat everyone equally regardless of race and				

Legend

* Distinguishing statement at P< 0.05
** Distinguishing statement at P< 0.01
▶ z-Score for the statement is higher than in all other factors
◀ z-Score for the statement is lower than in all other factors
☐ Consensus Statements

Fig. 3 Idealized Q sort for Viewpoint 1

actions. As reflected in the following interview extracts, awareness of and sensitivity towards people's vulnerabilities was believed to allow for more effective and preventive policing responses:

> 'They might be a suspect but regardless, you need to understand them. If you're going in all guns blazing, completely unaware of any vulnerabilities that they've got, it's not going to benefit us or them, no one is going to work with each other, so I think to have that awareness of vulnerabilities is a good thing, it's positive.' (PO11, female, age 27, white British)

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A similar sentiment was expressed by a service user with experience of interactions with policing:

> '… there's more to things than just a crime. You have to look at things that might have happened before… like their home life and the situation they're in.' (SU10, male, age 47, Mixed Heritage – White & Black Caribbean)

There was a shared emphasis on the term's enabling potential to prioritize early intervention and prevention:

> 'For me it's anyone who's open to some sort of harm, whether it's physical, mental, or emotional, or they're open to being abused. So, vulnerability is not a meaningless term, it's got a lot of meaning behind it. It's used in different areas slightly differently but generally the meaning is the same.' (SP14, male, age 25, Pakistani)

Vulnerability was viewed as beneficial in practical ways in helping organizations and frontline staff identify those at risk of harm and extend support early on in a way that complements tasks related to enforcement.

The statement *'Vulnerability is a term that helps service providers work better together'* received broad agreement (positioned in the grid as +3)[9] in this viewpoint, highlighting a shared view that an increased focus on vulnerability has strengthened multi-agency partnerships, enabling more coordinated responses to complex needs. Vulnerability-informed practices were believed to have improved information sharing systems, allowing public services to better identify needs and provide targeted support, exemplified by this service provider reflecting on youth work:

> 'I think over recent years, the empathy approach and the understanding of children, particularly now, as victims rather than just criminals, has changed massively since I entered this field. I've worked with young people for 30 plus years and our relationship with the police is probably the strongest it's ever been.' (SP17, female, age 57, White British)

One police officer also highlighted how information sharing enables early identification of risk and better support:

> 'If I find that this individual is challenging, they could potentially be a risk… then I do raise that to the youth worker on that shift… if I'm not there, then the youth workers don't know anything really about these kids.' (PO8, male, age 34, Mixed Heritage – White & Asian)

Similarly, some participants noted how vulnerability as an organizing concept can help service providers from disparate sectors share their expertise and pool resources when needed. A community safety worker noted the benefits of such collaborative working:

> 'If you can share information as public services or public providers, you're pulling together specialist skills, expertise, knowledge, and resources.' (SP3, male, age 38, Pakistani)

Although agreeing on advantages that derive from a vulnerability focus, participants differed in terms of how they understood the term and recognized this diversity of

[9] +3 represents 'strong agreement'; +2 'moderate agreement' and +1 'limited agreement'.

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interpretation. Hence, translating vulnerability into everyday practices was acknowledged as a key challenge:

> 'a working definition… would be helpful… then, we're all on the same page. But again, your working definition's going to be quite large because of that complexity and size of vulnerabilities that some of our communities can face, and you could strand it into loads of strands… it probably is that all-encompassing'. (SP17, female, age 57, White British)

Overall, Viewpoint 1 illustrates the organizational work that vulnerability can perform: it functions as a boundary object that enables inter-agency collaboration and data-sharing practices, legitimizes early intervention and prevention, and demands more holistic responses to complex needs. Multi-agency partnerships are viewed as networks of care and support, with the police serving a dual role as both enforcers of the law and providers of protection. Trust in the system is assumed rather than questioned, and the emphasis is on improving how institutions work *together*. Although it acknowledges the ambiguity in definitions, protocols and roles and responsibilities, these are outweighed by the operational benefits of vulnerability as a collaborative framing for shared action. This optimism is likely shaped by Bradford's long-standing investment in multi-agency infrastructures (e.g. Born in Bradford project), where sustained partnership working has mainstreamed vulnerability as a shared framework for coordinated support.

Viewpoint 2: Sceptical and distrusting

This viewpoint reflects significant scepticism about the ability of public services as a whole to effectively translate a vulnerability-oriented approach in practice (Figure 4). It expresses profound concerns about deeper structural issues, including institutional racism, privacy violations, and distrust in public services grounded in direct or vicarious experiences of discriminatory practices, bias and mistreatment.

Specifically on policing, there was a general sense that individuals could not rely on police for help, often informed by past experiences of neglect or inadequate responses. For example, two service users with experiences of interactions with police and partner services noted:

> 'I had a friend that was assaulted and hate crimed, and they dropped the case like two weeks in.' (SU18, female, age 20, White British)

> 'That's why people don't like to ring the police for any help. They just sort it out themselves […] I would do it myself […] they didn't do nothing in the past innit.' (SU20, male, age 17, White – Other background[10])

The below quote mentioned police officers who 'fail' at implementing a vulnerability-oriented approach, indicating a need for a softer, more accountable type of policing towards the 'vulnerable':

> '… as a police officer you will be engaging with a lot of people, but I've seen a lot that don't know how. They hold that authority and talk like they have that authority when it's not needed.' (SU18, female, age 20, White British).

[10] 'White—Other' reflects participant selection using UK Census categories. No additional information was provided about national or ethnic identity. We acknowledge this label's limitations in capturing diverse experiences or racialisation and in fully reflecting the complexity of lived identities. Our use of this term is therefore descriptive, not analytical.

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Composite Q sort for Factor 2

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
** ◄ Public services need to be able to share personal information	** ◄ The police should be left alone to do their job	The police spend too much time investigating hate crimes	Even some terrorists should be regarded as vulnerable	** The police are in a good position to help vulnerable people	Local charities do a better job at supporting vulnerable people than	The police should focus on improving young people's difficult lives	** ► Many vulnerable victims never come to the attention of public services	** ► Vulnerable people do not trust public services to protect them
** ◄ Vulnerability is a meaningless term	Calling someone vulnerable is offensive	A perpetrator's vulnerability is not important when a serious crime	* The police have gone too soft in recent years	** The police should stop acting like social workers	** Police officers are particularly vulnerable given the	It is unfair when service providers decide who is vulnerable and	Vulnerable people often don't see themselves as vulnerable	** ► Men hide their vulnerabilities
	The police should focus on catching criminals, not helping	* ◄ Vulnerability is another word for those who are socially disadvantaged	* ◄ Vulnerable people who refuse to engage should never be forced	** ► For most vulnerable people, the police are the problem, not	** ◄ Organisations fail vulnerable people because they lack funding	People are often more fearful of social workers than police	** ► The police fail to protect some vulnerable people because of	
	** ◄ The police treat everyone equally regardless of race and	The criminal justice system does a good job of serving vulnerable	Bad girls' aren't seen as vulnerable	The police are one of the few public services that can actually help	Diverting resources from the police to public health and other	It's a good thing that policing is now more focused on vulnerability	More attention should be given to preventing online abuse	
		** ◄ Even when people have experienced trauma, they need to take	** ► it's routine practice for Police to abuse vulnerable people	** ► Sharing personal information between public services can	** ► Public services are institutionally racist (not just the	* Young offenders should be seen as children first, offenders		
			Focusing on vulnerability draws attention away from issues of	Partnerships between police and social services will be dominated by	* Vulnerability' is a term that helps different service providers to			
			** ◄ Arresting vulnerable people can sometimes help them	Prioritising certain groups based on their vulnerability is the right	** ► We should all be treated as vulnerable			
				** ◄ The behaviour of victims is often a barrier to police investigations				

Legend

- * Distinguishing statement at P< 0.05
- ** Distinguishing statement at P< 0.01
- ► z-Score for the statement is higher than in all other factors
- ◄ z-Score for the statement is lower than in all other factors
- ☐ Consensus Statements

Fig. 4 Idealized Q sort for Viewpoint 2

Similarly, this participant expressed the view that the police need to be more compassionate:

> 'I don't believe you can be too kind, that's what's needed. They need to uphold the law within a trauma-informed way, and if that means showing kindness with authority, that's what they should do. I don't believe they've gone too soft. I think actually, they probably need softening up a little bit more in respect to that.' (SP7, female, age 47, White British)

The intersection of race, ethnicity, and systemic discrimination also emerged prominently in accounts of policing and racialized harm, as manifested where participants strongly agreed (+3 on the grid) with the statement '*police fail to protect some vulnerable people*

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because of institutional racism'. These were not seen simply as failures of communication, but structural violations, as exemplified by below quotation:

> 'My boyfriend is half-Jamaican/half-British, and we went to [a festival] this year […] the security pulled him […] They then got the police involved, they made him take off his shorts […] he's completely naked at this point […] they were laughing, they were joking […] I didn't even get searched. I had a bag, and they didn't even say, "Let me look in your bag".' (SU1, female, age 17, White British)

From this viewpoint, experiences like these served to undermine trust in the police. Additionally, institutional distrust also extended to other public services:

> '… there is people in my personal life that I would say have been failed by services. Not necessarily the police […] but like social services looking at children, the mental health services and stuff.' (SU1, female, age 17, White British)

Echoing the work on street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980; Zacka 2017), there was a sense that moral dispositions of frontline workers intervene in their delivery of care:

> '… they don't always listen to the client and it's almost like they're being professionally gaslit and professionally controlled rather than it's not coming from an intimate partner anymore, it's actually coming from professionals, "You're this, you're that, you need to do this, you need to do that".' (SP15, female, age 39, White – Irish)

Consequently, this viewpoint highlighted how vulnerability, as is currently operationalized, can reinforce the power imbalances it aims to mitigate, particularly when protective intentions pave the way for coercive measures. One participant referring to her experience of domestic abuse mentioned:

> 'When my ex used to do that to me I'd be scared to death to ring the police because I'd know Social Services were coming out […] I really needed their involvement, but I'd heard all these horror stories of people losing their kids in the area, and I was like, do I ring up?' (SU12, female, age 38, White British)

There was also an evident, shared anxiety about '*public services needing to share personal information more freely*' (positioned in the grid as -4). This was often expressed in terms of fears about long-term consequences of recording and circulating personal data within systems they did not trust:

> 'I didn't want anything to do with the H [heroin] word on my medical records, and my employer was starting to ask for occupational health getting involved, blah, blah, blah. It looks a bit dodgy if I don't say you can see them.' (SU15, female, age 57, Mixed Heritage – White & Asian)

Overall, while this viewpoint does not reject the value of vulnerability as a boundary object, it expresses deep scepticism about its translations within existing institutional settings, as manifested by quotes about inability of frontline actors to genuinely implement vulnerability. Vulnerability, according to this viewpoint, is not understood as a neutral condition to be identified, triaged and responded to, but as a category that may well be produced and reinforced by services. It foregrounds how structural issues including racism, mistrust, and coercive welfare practices undermine the potential of vulnerability to facilitate genuinely

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supportive interventions, particularly for marginalized communities. This viewpoint highlights how vulnerability is unevenly operationalized through discretionary practices and racialized governance of need that arguably informs institutional mistrust. These concerns are particularly resonant in a context like Bradford, where histories of racialization and service underinvestment shape experiences of institutional contact.

Viewpoint 3: Ambivalent about capacity and police role

The third viewpoint is characterized by ambivalence toward vulnerability-oriented policing, shaped by concerns about the capacity of public services, particularly the police, to adequately extend support to those identified as vulnerable (Figure 5).

Composite Q sort for Factor 3

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
** ◄ The police fail to protect some vulnerable people because of	** ► Vulnerability is a meaningless term	** ◄ The police are in a good position to help vulnerable people	Prioritising certain groups based on their vulnerability is the right	** ◄ Vulnerable people do not trust public services to protect them	The behaviour of victims is often a barrier to police investigations	Many vulnerable victims never come to the attention of public services	** ► Organisations fail vulnerable people because they lack funding	** ► The police have gone too soft in recent years
it's routine practice for Police to abuse vulnerable people	Calling someone vulnerable is offensive	The criminal justice system does a good job of serving vulnerable	** ◄ It is unfair when service providers decide who is vulnerable and	* ◄ Vulnerability' is a term that helps different service providers to	More attention should be given to preventing online abuse	It's a good thing that policing is now more focused on vulnerability	Men hide their vulnerabilities	** ► Police officers are particularly vulnerable given the
	We should all be treated as vulnerable	** Sharing personal information between public services can	Focusing on vulnerability draws attention away from issues of	The police are one of the few public services that can actually help	Local charities do a better job at supporting vulnerable people than	Arresting vulnerable people can sometimes help them	** ► The police treat everyone equally regardless of race and	
	Public services are institutionally racist (not just the	** ◄ Diverting resources from the police to public health and other	* Vulnerability is another word for those who are socially disadvantaged	** ◄ The police should focus on improving young people's difficult lives	People are often more fearful of social workers than police	** ► Even when people have experienced trauma, they need to take	Vulnerable people often don't see themselves as vulnerable	
		The police spend too much time investigating hate crimes	Bad girls' aren't seen as vulnerable	Even some terrorists should be regarded as vulnerable	** ► Vulnerable people who refuse to engage should never be forced	** ► The police should stop acting like social workers		
			For most vulnerable people, the police are the problem, not	Partnerships between police and social services will be dominated by	** Public services need to be able to share personal information			
			A perpetrator's vulnerability is not important when a serious crime	** ► The police should focus on catching criminals, not helping	** ► The police should be left alone to do their job			
				** ◄ Young offenders should be seen as children first, offenders				

Legend

* Distinguishing statement at P< 0.05

** Distinguishing statement at P< 0.01

► z-Score for the statement is higher than in all other factors

◄ z-Score for the statement is lower than in all other factors

☐ Consensus Statements

Fig. 5 Idealized Q sort for Viewpoint 3

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Although vulnerability is recognized as a relevant concept in policing work, it questions the extent to which responsibility to translate this into effective support interventions falls to the police in a context of austerity given the blurred boundaries between enforcement and care. The viewpoint advocates a clearer definition of responsibilities across services with a more circumscribed role for the police, given their limited knowledge, training, and practical capacities to deliver 'care' alongside crime-fighting priorities.

The relevance of vulnerability-focused approaches was acknowledged, and police were believed to have some role in advancing these aims:

> 'No longer are we able to just focus on crime, regardless of the fact that really that is our sole purpose and that is what we should be doing. I think it's changed; it's changed massively now.' (PO11, female, age 27, White British)

However, this viewpoint expressed anxiety over expansion of police roles and responsibilities relating to care and support, which was seen as detracting from a crime-fighting focus. Participants questioned whether police were equipped with appropriate resources to address these vulnerabilities in a meaningful way:

> 'I do think pulling police officers away from their core role to go deal with vulnerability or mental health is having a massive impact on the officers still on the frontline, and it's having a massive impact on the people needing that help, because they're not, I don't think they're the best trained people to do it.' (PO1, male, age 42, White British)

From this viewpoint, the current climate of public service cuts and resource constraints necessitated multi-agency responses to vulnerability, but participants echoed Viewpoint 1 in supporting greater clarity about the boundaries between services regarding 'vulnerable' people, with a more restricted role for the police. Accordingly, police needed to identify and signpost those individuals on to better-equipped services, rather than themselves provide ongoing support:

> '…whatever incident that you're dealing with, deal with the initial, do the relevant referrals and… it should then be passed onto the appropriate agency or partner to deal with and take control of.' (PO16, male, age 30, White British)

> 'We're more there in the short term whereas other agencies are there for the long term or maybe we're there to identify the risk and then other agencies are there to put that support in place.' (PO11, female, age 27, White British)

One of the distinguishing features of Viewpoint 3 was general agreement with the statement that 'police should stop acting like social workers' (positioned on the grid at +2). It was frequently emphasized that police are not the best-place service to respond to vulnerabilities:

> 'I'm trained to deal with crimes, log crimes, protect people, I've got officer safety training, first aid training, but I don't know what's best for children when I go to a job and they have to get taken off the parents, or where they should go and live. I'm not best for older people who have hoarding problems. I'm not trained for that, I'm not a social worker.' (PO3, female, age 28, White British)

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This viewpoint highlighted that the responsive and fast-paced nature of police work places severe restrictions around, and limitations upon, police capacity to deliver 'care' rather than to impose some form of 'control' before moving on:

> 'A lot of people get into this job because they want to help people and support them… But because I'm in the job and probably a little bit more cynical now than I was when I started, I know I don't have time for that.' (PO3, female, age 28, White British)

These limitations were also recognized by service users:

> 'If they had the funding, they could have extra officers that deal just in that, talking to people and seeing what they need. A police officer can't always do all of that because they haven't got the time' (SU6, female, age 44, White British)

Contrary to Viewpoint 1, a recurring theme in this viewpoint was a tension between 'crime-fighting' police work and 'vulnerability' policing. Underpinned by shared anxiety that police may be becoming 'too soft', among the two apparently discordant faces of the police function, the former was held out as the conventional focus that serves often to undermine the latter:

> 'Police should actually focus on catching people, but when it comes to vulnerable people, they come second.' (SU13, female, age 43, White British)

> 'We do catch criminals, we're also preventing criminals from finding vulnerable people, we're stopping criminals exploiting them, we're preventing things from happening in the future.' (PO7, female, age 39, White British)

This anxiety was mirrored in how participants maintained a distinction between 'vulnerable people' and 'suspects':

> 'We need to be a service to those vulnerable people out there. We need to identify and help them, but we also need to remain a force in dealing with the suspects, which is something we're not doing!' (PO16, male, age 30, White British)

> 'There won't be vulnerable people if they caught the criminals, because when they don't catch the criminals, they can keep repeating what they're doing.' (SU5, female, age 24, White British)

Finally, unique to this viewpoint was an emphasis on vulnerabilities faced by police officers themselves, given their occupational exposure to harm and stress:

> 'I think any officer is extremely vulnerable to being out there and being attacked or coming to serious harm when they're on duty.' (PO1, male, age 42, White British)

> 'There's stringent rules around Tasering and truncheons, these items that they've got to protect themselves. They're open to abuse from the public… The physical abuse that they can encounter.' (SP8, female, age 44, White British)

Importantly, there was an emphasis on the heightened accountability pressures especially when dealing with vulnerable individuals, more so than other services:

> '…if it's involving a vulnerable person, then the police are held accountable pretty much straight away if things don't go right… there's a big pressure on the police to identify

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those vulnerable people quickly and get them dealt with.' (PO16, male, age 30, White British)

Overall, this viewpoint adopts an ambivalent stance toward the potential of vulnerability as a boundary object within policing, shaped mainly by concerns about institutional capacity, resources and skillset. While acknowledging the importance of identifying and supporting those who are vulnerable, the ambivalence is towards the appropriateness of positioning the police as central actors in addressing complex social needs that require long-term support. The emphasis here is on clarifying the roles and responsibilities across services, in ways that police remain as initial responders and referrers to other support services, rather than *de facto* providers of support, while maintaining crime-fighting duties. In deprived cities like Bradford and in a context of resource pressures, police as a service of last resort can be drawn further into welfare functions that blur partnership boundaries and foster heightened tensions around delivery capacity and distributions of responsibilities.

Cross-viewpoint perspectives

Whilst Q methodology underscores that the viewpoints (rather than people in them) are the primary concern of the method, as Table 3 below highlights, it is pertinent to note that some viewpoints are more mixed than others in our study. For instance, police officers are absent from Viewpoint 2. However, its scepticism toward public services is shared by both service providers as well as service users, challenging the assumption that distrust is limited to those on the receiving end of services. Similarly, the ambivalent stance toward a vulnerability orientation in policing was shared across service users and frontline service providers as well as police officers in Viewpoint 3.

As Rutherford (1993) demonstrated, despite the importance of occupational cultures (in a policing context see Chan 2008), senior and frontline workers retain principles, ethics and beliefs that may be at odds with dominant organizational cultures. Moreover, these 'working credos' not only cut across professional groups but also shape practices and determine how policy implementation is realized. Within this framework, our findings show that, while professional affiliation and occupational cultures may explain some of the views captured, they are not determinative.

Table 3 indicates some notable patterns across the three distinct viewpoints. Viewpoint 1 (Optimistic) is the most mixed in terms of demographics and professional backgrounds, including police officers, service users and other service providers with differing ages,

Table 3 Viewpoints by participants

Viewpoints	V1: Optimistic (n = 29)	V2: Sceptical and distrusting (n = 14)	V3: Ambivalent of capacity (n = 14)
Service users	28% (8)	79% (11)	21% (3)
Police	24% (7)	0% (0)	71% (10)
Service providers	48% (14)	21% (3)	7% (1)
Average age	41 years	31 years	37 years
Women	48% (14)	71% (10)	71% (10)
Racially minoritized	31% (9)	50% (7)	14% (2)

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ethnicities and genders. Conversely, Viewpoint 2 (Sceptical and Distrusting) is largely comprised of younger participants, women and racially minoritized service users with no police officers present. Young and racially minoritized women are more likely to experience dismissal, disrespect and coercion, which might explain the scepticism present in Viewpoint 2. By contrast, Viewpoint 3 (Ambivalent about Capacity) is overwhelmingly composed of police officers with a lower proportion of racially minoritized participants. In part, the ambivalence toward a vulnerability agenda present in Viewpoint 3 may reflect equivocal views on the police identifying as crime-fighters or care-givers.

It should be noted that Q methodology does not seek to be representative or causal as demographic variables alone cannot explain or predict the pervasiveness of a viewpoint across any given population. Instead, they indicate more complex and overlapping views toward institutional roles, responsibilities, and limitations, reinforcing the strength of Q methodology in capturing shared perspectives across diverse professional and lay groups.

Consensus across viewpoints

The findings reveal considerable consensus across all three viewpoints, transcending the sub-group distinctive features. There is shared recognition that many vulnerable groups and individuals face barriers to accessing adequate support and are often poorly served in ways that fall far short of addressing the root causes of their vulnerability. Related to that, there is agreement on the need for multi-agency responses to vulnerability, as well as broad agreement that the police play an inevitable yet restricted role therein. While differing in emphasis, all viewpoints agree that police alone are insufficient in responding to vulnerability. Systemic issues, whether framed as institutional failures (V2) or resource constraints (V3) in service provision, shape how vulnerability is operationalized and experienced. There is also a consensus concern that vulnerabilities are often under-recognized by public services.

This shared outlook is further underscored by strong rejection (placed at −3) of the statement that 'calling someone vulnerable is offensive', and equally strong agreement (+3) that 'vulnerable people often don't see themselves as vulnerable'. The former suggests a widespread embracing of vulnerability as a useful concept around which to organize service delivery. However, the latter highlights the external ascription of vulnerability, where institutional definitions of need may diverge from people's own understandings, raising concerns about its potential to justify coercive interventions. Together, they reveal a disjuncture between the *idea* of vulnerability as an organizing category and the *lived experiences* of how it is operationalized by services. This tension lies at the heart of vulnerability's potential as a boundary object, which we elaborate upon in the next section.

Discussion: Making sense of vulnerability in the context of policing

Through the three viewpoints and the consensus statements, our study reveals the relevance and potential value -as well as challenges—of vulnerability as a shared lens that shapes service provision and experiences thereof. By contrast to the optimism of **Viewpoint 1** about the promises of vulnerability as a concept, **Viewpoint 2**, shifts the focus to the *translation* of vulnerability and highlights how the moral dispositions of frontline service providers, as well as wider systemic inequalities and institutional deficits, can prevent protective intentions from being realized and even produce harm. This is especially evident when services

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designed to protect instead generate fear, surveillance, or institutional violence, particularly where vulnerability is used to justify discretionary intervention or data sharing in contexts of low trust. These findings are especially resonant in a city like Bradford, where legacies of racialization, spatially concentrated disadvantage, and public service underinvestment shape people's expectations and experiences of support.

Viewpoint 3 adds another critical lens, pointing to the institutional vulnerability of public services themselves, particularly the police. Rather than rejecting the principle of vulnerability-led approaches, this viewpoint emphasizes the lack of resources, infrastructure, and appropriate training to safely and effectively incorporate these approaches into existing risk management and crime control practices. In the context of Bradford's high service demand and multi-agency complexity, these capacity concerns are grounded in lived professional experience. They reflect a pragmatic ambivalence about the risks of expanding the police role into domains of care without adequate support. This viewpoint calls for a recalibration of responsibilities, positioning the police as initial responders and referrers, rather than default providers, of support.

The sharp divergences between the viewpoints reveal a disjuncture between the role and value of vulnerability as a concept and the lived experiences of how it is operationalized in policing and related settings. Vulnerability is a politically charged and unevenly operationalized concept. Its role and value is actively negotiated across different viewpoints that social actors hold. This is manifested in the co-presence of viewpoints that embrace vulnerability as an organizing concept (cross-viewpoint consensus and V1) and those that address the harming potential of its implementation (V2 and V3), a tension central to the idea of boundary object.

We argue that, despite, and perhaps because of, its ambiguous meaning, vulnerability can operate as a *boundary object* (Star and Griesemer 1989): a flexible concept that inhabits multiple and intersecting social worlds, facilitating connection across diverse interests, organizational values, and professional perspectives within multi-agency settings led by the police. The study provides empirical evidence that vulnerability allows different groups (police and practitioners) to work together without consensus. However, our data also highlights that underneath this consensus, vulnerability is also connected with coercive interventions, disguising power imbalances between services and communities or transferring responsibility for addressing harm onto under-equipped actors.

A boundary object creates common understandings; areas of focus for action that people can act towards or with and 'translate' in their setting. Star (2010) notes that the interpretive flexibility and broad parameters of the boundary object can make stakeholders feel as though they need better and more concrete definitions to move forward, which was raised in Viewpoint 1 and to a lesser extent in Viewpoint 3. However, boundary objects function less through definitional precision and more through enactment in practice. 'Their materiality derives from action, not from a sense of prefabricated stuff or "thing"-ness' (Star 2010: 603).

It is important, therefore, to recognize that boundary objects can help people work in the absence of consensus, but they can also mislead when the different interpretations of them have different consequences for action. Hence, this emphasis on *translation* is pivotal because, as our findings show, translation is never neutral, and the capacity of vulnerability to span institutional boundaries does not magically resolve structural deficits and generate supportive and just outcomes. On the contrary, it may become a sorting device to ration and selectively deliver care and support. When operationalized in the context of UK policing, vulnerability is deeply imbued with normative and discretionary inclinations of service providers and also service users. Yet, Viewpoint 2 brings to light what Svensson (2003: 98)

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calls the 'categorically unequal setting' between frontline workers and those helped, wherein the former, acting as representatives of the structure, retain the preferential right to define what constitutes help, support, or a 'normal' life. Crucially, this viewpoint pushes us to expand our understanding of social control beyond overt coercion. Despite not rejecting the conceptual value of vulnerability, it demands vigilance about the harm that may be caused by how it is translated and by whom.

Wider consensus around the inadequacy of the police alone to address vulnerability and the need for multi-agency working reflects a growing recognition that genuine support requires more holistic and support-centred responses to harm. Moving beyond the traditional view of police as 'crime fighters', this consensus acknowledges the preventive forces beyond policing, as complementary to policing tasks of crime prevention (Crawford 2024). However, as Viewpoint 3 alerts us, the expansion of police responsibility into domains of care without corresponding investments in infrastructure, tools, skills or mandates risks reducing vulnerability to a device simply to triage need, rather than a pathway to reimagining and reorienting care and support.

On the other hand, the expansion of police roles in triaging vulnerability-oriented interventions in multi-agency settings has become increasingly contested in the UK (Crawford 2024), as it accords police significant powers to define vulnerability, actively shaping who is worthy of support and who is not. Through the entanglement of policing with regimes of welfare via multi-agency preventive partnerships, the risks increase that logics of security and crime control colonize further and deeper into the social fabric (Crawford 2009). Importantly, as Viewpoint 2 highlights, those deemed 'vulnerable' are also those *most* likely to experience intersecting forms of disadvantage and are disproportionately affected by the inequities of police oppression and discrimination. The study therefore underscores the need for delimiting the supportive and protective roles of police in light of the intrinsic risks of criminalization and over-policing that some communities are too readily the subject of.

Viewpoints 2 and 3 serve as cautionary counterweights to the more optimistic orientation of Viewpoint 1 and the cross-viewpoint consensus around the value of vulnerability as an organizing frame. Thinking together, these viewpoints underscore that *translating* vulnerability requires more than definitional clarity, and highlights that without confronting structural and institutional deficits, it may produce *iatrogenic harm*: injury or damage caused by interventions intended to help or protect (Cohen 1988; Illich 1976).

Importantly, our findings also show how the operationalization and the experiences of vulnerability are deeply shaped by the wider social context of Bradford, marked by deprivation, demographic complexity, legacies of mistrust in state-community relations, and a complex web of multi-agency endeavours to respond to increasing need. By contextualizing our findings, we provide rich insights into viewpoints about how vulnerability is operationalized under enduring pressures of austerity, rather than just normatively. We develop and extend the discussions on moral dispositions of street-level bureaucrats also by examining the viewpoints shared across service users (as well as frontline actors), informed by their direct and vicarious experiences of engaging with services in Bradford.

As Wu (2020) illustrates, the ways in which street-level bureaucrats navigate and enact vulnerability vary significantly across global settings. In this regard, international perspectives offer valuable opportunities to rethink and expand how vulnerability is conceptualized and operationalized across diverse socio-political contexts. Rather than anchoring interpretations in Western, individualized notions of agency, often linked to capacity, culpability, and binary distinctions between victim and offender, alternative frameworks may foreground relationality, community responsibility, or structural conditions in different ways. Attending these

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variations opens space for more pluralistic, contextually grounded understandings. Further research is needed to explore how vulnerability is framed and practiced in different regions, as part of a broader, multi-sited dialogue on harm reduction.

Conclusion

Despite conceptual fuzziness in how vulnerability is deployed through practices and its notable limitations, vulnerability retains progressive potential. Its appeal and utility as a way of mobilizing shared platforms for action on injustice derives in part from its malleability, which is both its strength and its risk. While conceptual slippage carries costs and dangers, so too can greater precision. Viewing vulnerability as a boundary object offers a way to unveil its progressive potential as it challenges that it is a neutral descriptor of need. What is clear from our findings is that vulnerability can serve as a boundary object, not because of its conceptual value, but only *if* it is translated into practice through structural accountability that attends to the power differentials that shape its implementation.

The viewpoints reveal the practical conditions under which vulnerability fails to facilitate meaningful and effective collaboration, which offers grounded insights into how vulnerability-oriented policing can be redesigned to avoid reproducing harm. Conceptualizing vulnerability as a boundary object for policing partnerships offers a perspective from which to think systemically about the precarious relation between care and control in public safety and welfare. At its most radical, a vulnerability lens can shift focus toward those whose marginalization stems from structural abandonment and adversarial relationships with the state, including the police. These are often the very people whom public safety institutions are meant to protect, but instead disproportionately criminalize or neglect.

In this sense, vulnerability provides a tense but potentially transformative lens through which to reimagine the future of policing as a public service and explore how it might be differently envisioned, prioritized and delivered. It holds promise to redesign whole-system responses to public safety that incorporate and harness the role of diverse agencies and clarify institutional roles, particularly of the police within that. However, translating this into actionable practice requires more than definitional clarification or improved coordination. It demands a fundamental rethinking of how social need is governed by moral dispositions of frontline actors working within institutional settings shaped by austerity and enduring power inequalities. As our findings demonstrate, despite well-intentioned interventions, vulnerability can become a cloak under which individuals are sorted, triaged and managed while the systemic and relational dimensions of harm remain obscured. In this way, vulnerability risks reproducing the marginalization of those who might be considered the most vulnerable in society.

Advancing a more progressive role for vulnerability within policing and public safety also demands a radical revisioning of the police's legitimate remit in responding to social need, one that moves beyond a police-centred model of multi-agency working, and toward long-term investments in co-produced infrastructures of care that include prevention as well as support and that address the deep-rooted structural conditions that themselves reinforce vulnerability.

Given the contentious nature and cultural salience of policing and crime control, especially in relation to vulnerability, criminology is a field where subjective opinions, views and beliefs of professionals and publics abound, clash and are immensely consequential; with a well-established history of analysing competing values, beliefs and sentiments of those working within policing and criminal justice (Reiner 1991; Rutherford 1993) and public opinions on crime (Hough and Roberts 2023). By introducing Q methodology to

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criminology and applying it to the field of vulnerability, we highlight how Q methodology reveals shared and competing moral logics underpinning on prominent and vexed subjects across frontline service providers and equally importantly service users.

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Author contributions

Conceptualization: A.C. and K.B. developed the overarching research aims and study design. *Methodology:* A.C. and K.B. designed the methodological approach. C.D., O.Y. and T.K. conducted the methodological analysis. *Investigation:* C.D., O.Y., T.K. and A.C. conducted the data collection. *Analysis:* C.D., T.K. and O.Y. led on the factor analysis and interview coding. The wider analysis and data interpretation was developed collectively by the full team. *Writing:* All authors contributed to the writing of the article and approved the final manuscript. O.Y. led on reviewing, amending and sharpening the text.

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