Implementing neighbourhood policing through a lens of vulnerability:
A case study of South Yorkshire Police

By

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, vulnerability has become embedded as a central organising concept in policing. More recently, following years of retrenchment, neighbourhood policing has re-emerged as a focus of investment and political priority nationally. Despite the prominence of both vulnerability and neighbourhood policing within contemporary policing policy and discourse, their intersection remains relatively underexamined.

This thesis addresses this gap by exploring neighbourhood policing within a vulnerability-focused policy landscape and examining how neighbourhood officers interpret and operationalise vulnerability. Conducted in collaboration with South Yorkshire Police (SYP), the research adopted a case study design, drawing on observational fieldwork and semi-structured interviews.

The findings show how vulnerability operated as a lens through which traditional police 'problems' were reframed as manifestations of underlying individual, social and environmental circumstances. This reflected a problem-solving orientation in which vulnerability was cast as the 'problem' to solve, extending attention beyond immediate issues towards the factors producing or sustaining them. Officers understood vulnerability as dynamic, socially mediated and context-specific, interpreting it through intersecting ideas of risk, capacity, need and relative disadvantage. Identification was a cumulative process drawing on official frameworks, interpersonal engagement and intuitive judgement informed by experience and local knowledge. Responses to vulnerable people varied in pace and purpose, ranging from immediate safeguarding and de-escalation to early intervention and longer-term, partnership-based activities.

The study demonstrates how neighbourhood policing practices, particularly problem-solving, sustained local knowledge and citizen engagement, contributed distinctively to the understanding and management of vulnerability-related issues within SYP. At the same time, organisational pressures, competing demands and limited capacity generated tensions around how far officers could, and felt they should, address such issues. The thesis argues that the important contribution made by neighbourhood policing within a vulnerability-orientated landscape depends on a wider system that supports its contribution while recognising the appropriate limits of the police role.

Table of Contents

Acronyms and abbreviations ..... **ix**

List of tables ..... **x**

Chapter One: Introduction **1**

1.1. Research background 1

1.2. Research aim, questions and contribution 3

1.3. Thesis structure 5

Chapter Two: Situating the concept of vulnerability in its theoretical, social policy and policing contexts **7**

2.1. Vulnerability in theory 7

2.1.1. Defining vulnerability through its key cognate concepts 9

2.1.1.1. Vulnerability, risk and (in)security *9*

2.1.1.2. Vulnerability, resilience and capacity *11*

2.1.2. Universal vulnerability 12

2.1.3. Situational vulnerability 14

2.1.4. Pluralistic vulnerability 17

2.1.5. Section summary 19

2.2. Vulnerability in social policy 20

2.2.1. Exploring vulnerability in welfare state debates 21

2.2.2. Vulnerability as a trigger for 'special measures' 24

2.2.3. Interpreting and categorising vulnerability: practitioner discretion and measuring worthiness 26

2.2.4. The use of vulnerability as a mechanism to control 'risky' groups 29

2.2.5. Section summary 31

2.3. Vulnerability in policing 31

2.3.1. Vulnerability as a traditional focus in policing 32

2.3.1.1. Framing approaches to policing vulnerable groups as a reflection and reproduction of social marginalisation *33*

2.3.1.2. Occupational police culture and policing vulnerable groups *36*

2.3.2. Vulnerability as a contemporary lens in policing 39

2.3.2.1. Deconstructing hierarchies of vulnerability and broadening the parameters of who qualifies as vulnerable *39*

2.3.2.2. Implications of the focus on vulnerability for the role and work of the police *41*
2.3.3. Section summary 43
2.4. Conclusion 44
Chapter Three: Tracing the emergence and evolution of neighbourhood policing 46
3.1. Community policing as a bedrock of British policing traditions 46
3.1.1. The common (mis)conception of the police as crime-fighters and its implications for community policing models 49
3.2. Community policing in the mid- to late-20th century 52
3.3. The launch of neighbourhood policing under New Labour 56
3.3.1. The National Reassurance Policing Programme (2003 – 2005) 57
3.3.2. The Neighbourhood Policing Programme (2004 – 2008) 58
3.4. Austerity and the retrenchment of neighbourhood policing (2010–2017) 61
3.5. Neighbourhood policing since austerity: the contemporary landscape 63
3.6. Conclusion 67
Chapter Four: Research design, methods and reflections 69
4.1. Research collaboration, aim and questions 69
4.2. The research paradigm and design 70
4.2.1. Exploratory case study approach 71
4.2.2. Incorporating ethnographic methods 72
4.3. The research partner and place: South Yorkshire Police and the case study sites 74
4.3.1. South Yorkshire Police 74
4.3.1.1. The county of South Yorkshire *75*
4.3.1.2. Histories, legacies and ongoing investigations *76*
4.3.1.3. The current state of South Yorkshire Police *78*
4.3.2. The case study sites: the selection process and area details 79
4.3.2.1. Whitechurch *80*
4.3.2.2. Ashgrove *81*
4.3.2.3. Brookwood *81*
4.4. The research methods: data collection and data analysis 83
4.4.1. Data collection 83
4.4.1.1. Observations *83*
4.4.1.2. Interviews *86*

4.4.1.3. Using different methods *88*
4.4.2. Data analysis 90
4.5. Research ethics 91
4.5.1. Briefing participants: obtaining informed consent 91
4.5.2. Protecting participant identity 92
4.5.3. Researching vulnerability 93
4.6. Research reflections and limitations 95
4.6.1. Doing collaborative research with the police: navigating the 'outsider–insider' continuum 95
4.6.2. Limitations of the research 100
4.7. Conclusion 102
Chapter Five: Interpreting vulnerability as a priority in neighbourhood policing 104
5.1. The recent focus on vulnerability in South Yorkshire Police 104
5.2. Vulnerability as an interpretive lens for reframing police 'problems' 109
5.2.1. Reframing 'problem' behaviours as products of constrained agency: reconceptualising offenders as victims 113
5.2.2. The emotional demands and implications of framing police 'problems' through a lens of vulnerability 116
5.2.2.1. Empathy as a required emotion in police work *116*
5.2.2.2. The emotional toll of police work *119*
5.2.3. Section summary 123
5.3. Situating vulnerability within the neighbourhood policing mandate 124
5.3.1. Alignments between vulnerability-focused work and neighbourhood policing 124
5.3.1.1. The centrality of problem-solving in neighbourhood policing *124*
5.3.1.2. The place-based orientation of neighbourhood policing *126*
5.3.1.3. The focus on welfare work in neighbourhood policing *129*
5.3.2. Tensions between vulnerability-focused work and neighbourhood policing 130
5.3.2.1. Responding to community demands and expectations *130*
5.3.2.2. Perceiving vulnerability-focused work as beyond the neighbourhood policing remit *136*
5.3.3. Section summary 141
5.4. Conclusion 142
Chapter Six: Definitions of vulnerability in neighbourhood policing 144

6.1. Definitions of vulnerability 144
6.1.1. Defining vulnerability in relation to risk and incapacity 145
6.1.2. Defining vulnerability in relation to disadvantage, difference and need 147
6.1.3. Section summary 150
6.2. Defining who is vulnerable and recognising different types of vulnerability 151
6.2.1. Associating vulnerability with certain physiological traits 151
6.2.2. Understanding vulnerability as a socially affected and mediated condition 153
6.2.3. Section summary 158
6.3. The challenges of defining vulnerability 158
6.3.1. The temporal potential of vulnerability 158
6.3.2. The capacious scope of vulnerability 159
6.3.3. Vulnerability as individually situated and experienced 160
6.3.4. Section summary 162
6.4. Conclusion 163
Chapter Seven: Identifying vulnerable people in neighbourhood policing 164
7.1. The use of official guidance to identify vulnerable people 165
7.1.1. The strengths and limitations of using official guidance 167
7.1.2. Deliberating the contribution of official guidance 170
7.1.3. Section summary 171
7.2. Operationalising intuition: the common sense and craft of 'knowing' vulnerability 172
7.2.1. The limits of relying on intuition and experience to identify vulnerable people 175
7.2.2. Section summary 180
7.3. Engagement as a means of investigating, checking and confirming suspected vulnerability 180
7.3.1. Barriers to using engagement to identify vulnerable people 183
7.3.2. Section summary 189
7.4. Conclusion 189
Chapter Eight: Responding to vulnerable people in neighbourhood policing . 191
8.1. Proactive responses to vulnerable people 192
8.1.1. The potential risks of proactive work: perceptions of over-policing and damaging police-citizen relations 196
8.1.2. Section summary 198

8.2. Immediate reactive responses to vulnerable people 199
8.2.1. Responding 'softly and slowly' to de-escalate situations 199
8.2.2. Delivering on-the-spot short-term 'problem-solving' 203
8.2.3. Using enforcement to manage risk and safeguard vulnerable people 206
8.2.4. Section summary 208
8.3. Long-term responses to vulnerable people 209
8.3.1. Tailoring responses and offering support to vulnerable people 209
8.3.2. The use of enforcement in long-term responses to vulnerable people 214
8.3.3. Section summary 217
8.4. Responding to vulnerable people in and through partnerships 218
8.4.1. The role and opportunities of partnership working 218
8.4.2. The challenges of partnership working 224
8.4.3. Section summary 227
8.5. Conclusion 228
Chapter Nine: Conclusion 229
9.1. Revisiting the research questions 229
9.2. Reflecting on the research design 239
9.3. Possible directions for future research 240
9.4. Final comments 242
Bibliography 244
Appendices 281
Appendix A: Interview schedule 281
Appendix B: Ethics approval letter from University of Leeds Ethics Committee 282
Appendix C: Participant information sheet 283
Appendix D: Participant consent form 285

Acronyms and abbreviations

ACPO - Association of Chief Police Officers

ASB - Antisocial behaviour

CI - Chief Inspector

COP - College of Policing

EBP - Evidence-based policing

ESRC - Economic and Social Research Council

HQ - Headquarters

HMIC - His/her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary

HMICFRS - His/her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

NPCC - National Police Chiefs' Council

NPT - Neighbourhood policing team

NPG - Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee

NPP - Neighbourhood Policing Programme

NRPP - National Reassurance Policing Programme

ONS - Office for National Statistics

PC - Police Constable

PCSO - Police Community Support Officer

PEEL - Police Effectiveness, Efficiency and Legitimacy

POP – Problem-orientated policing

SCP – Signal Crimes Perspective

S – Sergeant

I – Inspector

SYP - South Yorkshire Police

VAF – Vulnerability assessment framework

VKPP - Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme

WRDTP – White Rose Doctoral Training Partnership

List of tables

Table 3.1. The NPG pledges

Table 4.1: South Yorkshire's districts in terms of population, classification, size and crime rate

Table 4.2: Description of case study sites

Table 4.3: Number of hours spent observing at each case study site and the times of day and frequency of visits

Table 4.4: Number of interviewees across rank and case study sites

‘The evidence is clear that neighbourhood policing is the most effective way to build community confidence… [N]eighbourhood policing isn’t something that is nice to do… [I]t is fundamental to the police’s relationship with the public’ (HMICFRS, 2024).

‘[V]ulnerability provides a valuable lens through which to interrogate the future of policing as a public good and explore how it might be differently refocussed, prioritised and delivered’ (Crawford, 2024: 440).

Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis explores neighbourhood policing in England and Wales as a key site for the delivery of vulnerability-focused policing, understood here as the combination of the processes through which officers interpret, identify and respond to individuals perceived to be vulnerable. Neighbourhood policing has traditionally centred on community engagement, problem-solving and improving public confidence, yet today it operates within a policing and social policy landscape increasingly orientated towards vulnerability (Higgins, 2018a). This shift raises questions about the contemporary purpose and operation of neighbourhood policing and how neighbourhood officers negotiate their role within this evolving landscape. It also speaks to wider debates about how vulnerability is defined, assessed and acted upon in police practice and the nature, scope and limits of police intervention. This thesis examines these issues by exploring how neighbourhood officers interpreted and operationalised vulnerability and how the recent focus on the concept has shaped neighbourhood policing priorities and practices.

This introductory chapter, structured in three sections, establishes the foundations and trajectory of the thesis. The first section introduces the study's two central subjects: vulnerability and neighbourhood policing. As these are examined in detail in Chapters Two and Three respectively, the aim here is to provide a brief overview of the subjects and explain why the space in which they intersect warrants closer analysis. The chapter then sets out the research aim, questions and contribution, before outlining the thesis's structure.

1.1. Research background

Over the last two decades, vulnerability has become a central organising concept in policing in England and Wales. As police priorities have shifted markedly towards protecting vulnerable people and preventing, identifying and managing risk, vulnerability and risk have been embedded into the current 'performance narrative' for national policing (NPCC, 2017: 3). Now integrated within organisational strategies, policy agendas and national inspection frameworks, vulnerability has become 'ubiquitous as a concept underpinning police work' (Brown et al., 2024: 3).

A series of inquiries and reviews in recent years have exposed institutional weaknesses in how the police and other state agencies have recognised, prioritised and safeguarded vulnerable people (see Gray and Watt, 2013; Jay, 2014; Jay et al., 2020; Casey, 2023). In response, vulnerability has been deployed in part as a moral imperative intended to centre the needs of

those deemed most at risk and improve how they are protected and supported (Menichelli, 2019; Aliverti, 2020).

Vulnerability has also been mobilised as an operational tool, shaping how the police categorise issues, prioritise concerns and allocate resources (Keay and Kirby, 2018). These processes are especially significant in the context of rising and increasingly complex demand, as police forces have sought to manage workloads under conditions of austerity and wider public service retrenchment (Menichelli, 2019; Enang et al., 2019; 2022). As other services have been reduced or placed under pressure, the police have increasingly acted as residual responders to a growing range of harms and social problems (Cummins, 2013; 2018; Buscariolli, 2025). Such developments have prompted pressing questions about the appropriate role, capability and limits of the police within an increasingly vulnerability-orientated policy landscape (Loader, 2020; Crawford, 2024).

These questions are particularly important in the context of neighbourhood policing. Neighbourhood officers' local presence and routine contact with citizens place them in a distinctive position to identify and respond to emerging problems. As the contemporary iteration of community policing in England and Wales, neighbourhood policing is often dubbed the cornerstone of British policing (Longstaff et al., 2015; Higgins, 2018a). While the model lacks a universally agreed definition, there is broad consensus around its key aims and practices. These centre on community engagement and using problem-solving approaches to tackle crime and address community concerns (Quinton and Morris, 2008; Myhill and Quinton, 2011; Turley et al., 2012). By seeking to ensure that 'local people [are] part of the solution to local problems' (Rogers, 2017: 71), neighbourhood policing aims to enhance public confidence, legitimacy and trust in the police (Innes, 2004a; Tuffin et al., 2006). These principles are summarised in the COP's (2018) definition, which identifies three central features of neighbourhood policing:

1. 'Police officers, staff and volunteers accessible to, responsible for and accountable to communities,
2. Community engagement that builds trust and develops a sophisticated understanding of community needs,
3. Collaborative problem-solving with communities supported by integrated working with private, public and voluntary sectors'.

Alongside its traditional community-orientated functions, neighbourhood officers are increasingly expected to undertake vulnerability-focused work (NPCC, 2016; COP, 2019; HMICFRS, 2023). This foregrounds the need to consider how traditional neighbourhood

policing may interact with, be reshaped by or come into tension with the broader contemporary focus on vulnerability.

Such questions have attracted prior scholarly attention, most notably in the work of Higgins (2017; 2018a; 2018b; 2018c) who identifies tensions between core principles of neighbourhood policing and vulnerability-focused work. Specifically, Higgins suggests that the growing focus on vulnerability has shifted attention away from locally defined community concerns and place-based approaches towards a more centrally driven, vulnerability-centred mandate and the case management of vulnerable individuals. He (2018a: 2) further argues that budget cuts under austerity measures last decade contributed to 'the traditional outputs of neighbourhood policing [being] eroded'. Other work similarly identified a significant retrenchment of neighbourhood policing during this period, to the extent that its future appeared uncertain (O'Neill, 2014; Higgins and Hales, 2017; HMIC, 2017).

Much has changed since this earlier research was conducted. Rather than facing the precarious future it did last decade, neighbourhood policing has re-emerged as a central focus of policy attention and investment. It is now a leading government priority, with a recent White Paper on police reform pledging to reinstate it as a core policing model (Home Office, 2026). This commitment is supported by the government's pledge to recruit 13,000 additional neighbourhood officers by 2029 (HM Government, 2024) and the development of new training programmes and dedicated career pathways for neighbourhood officers (COP, 2025a). In this evolving context, renewed empirical examination is needed to understand how neighbourhood policing is being organised and enacted within today's increasingly vulnerability-orientated policy landscape.

1.2. Research aim, questions and contribution

The aim of this research was to explore neighbourhood policing as a key site for the delivery of vulnerability-focused policing. It was guided by five main questions:

1. How do neighbourhood officers interpret the recent focus on vulnerability in policing and how do they situate their role in a policy landscape increasingly orientated towards vulnerability?
2. How do neighbourhood officers define vulnerability?
3. How do neighbourhood officers identify vulnerable people?
4. How do neighbourhood officers respond to vulnerable people?

5. What challenges do neighbourhood officers encounter in their delivery of vulnerability-focused policing?

The study was funded through an ESRC Collaborative Studentship awarded by the WRDTP and conducted in collaboration with South Yorkshire Police (SYP). Its collaborative basis shaped this research in two overarching ways. First, at the outset, SYP identified neighbourhood policing and vulnerability as important areas warranting research. These areas reflected wider organisational priorities, ensuring that the study focused on issues of both practical and analytical significance.

Second, the collaboration supported the study's practical development and execution. SYP facilitated access to internal documents, relevant contacts and fieldwork sites, enabling the research to examine the organisation and work of neighbourhood policing within a specific force context. The research nevertheless retained academic independence in its design, analysis and interpretation. While the collaboration did not determine the findings, it influenced the conditions in which the study was undertaken and helped ensure that its questions and approaches were aligned with contemporary police practice.

An exploratory case study design was adopted, with qualitative data collected through observational fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with neighbourhood officers working across three sites in South Yorkshire. Further details about the study's collaborative basis and methodological approaches are explored in Chapter Four.

In addressing the research aim and questions, this thesis makes three primary contributions.

First, it contributes to neighbourhood policing scholarship by providing an empirically up-to-date account of practice during a period of significant organisational change. As Chapter Three demonstrates, much existing research examines neighbourhood policing either following its formal introduction in the early twenty-first century or during the subsequent period of austerity-driven retrenchment. Since then, however, the neighbourhood policing landscape has changed considerably. As outlined above (Section 1.1), renewed investment and political attention have reshaped the context in which neighbourhood policing operates, creating a need to examine contemporary practice and address this temporal gap in the literature.

Second, the thesis contributes to scholarship on vulnerability as an organising concept in policing. Vulnerability has increasingly been mobilised as a way of framing police priorities and responsibilities, prompting a growing body of empirical research examining how it is interpreted and operationalised in practice (see Keay and Kirby, 2018; Enang et al., 2019; 2022; Brown et al., 2024). Building on this work, the thesis provides a detailed account of how neighbourhood officers understood, negotiated and enacted vulnerability in their everyday

work. This is significant because vulnerability does not operate simply as policy rhetoric; its practical meaning is produced through frontline decisions, judgements and actions (Lipsky, 1980). By examining these processes, the thesis shows how vulnerability is translated and operationalised as it moves from policy into practice.

Third, the thesis contributes to broader criminological debates concerning the role, purpose and limits of policing. Through the lens of neighbourhood policing, it examines how officers understood their position and responsibilities within an increasingly vulnerability-focused landscape. Specifically, it identifies the occupational tensions, pressures and cultural expectations that shaped how officers interpreted and enacted their role. In doing so, the thesis provides insight into how the boundaries of contemporary policing are negotiated in frontline practice, including tensions around what the police can, should and are expected to do in response to complex social needs.

1.3. Thesis structure

The thesis is organised into eight subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two interrogates the conceptualisation and operationalisation of vulnerability across theoretical, social policy and policing contexts. It examines how vulnerability has been defined, the purposes it can serve and the opportunities and tensions associated with its use. In doing so, the chapter establishes vulnerability as an organising principle of governance with significant scope and implications for practice.

Chapter Three traces the development of neighbourhood policing in England and Wales. It situates neighbourhood policing within the broader tradition of community policing before charting the model's official launch in 2004, its development up to 2010, its retrenchment during the years of austerity in the 2010s and its re-emergence as a government priority in the 2020s. This account provides the contextual foundation for the empirical examination of contemporary neighbourhood policing.

Chapter Four sets out and justifies the study's research design and methodological approach. It outlines the research paradigm, introduces the research partner, SYP, and details the processes of data collection and analysis. It also addresses ethical considerations, reflects on the limitations of the study and considers my experience of doing collaborative research with the police and how I navigated the 'outsider–insider' continuum as an academic working

within a policing environment. As a whole, the chapter seeks to explain, and provide transparency about, how the research was conducted and produced.

Chapters Five to Eight present the empirical findings.

Chapter Five examines how neighbourhood officers interpreted vulnerability as a contemporary policing priority. It explores how vulnerability operated as a lens through which officers made sense of police 'problems' and considers the alignments and tensions between vulnerability-focused work and traditional neighbourhood policing aims. In doing so, the chapter offers key insights into the evolving purpose and orientation of neighbourhood policing.

Chapter Six presents neighbourhood officers' definitions of vulnerability. It analyses how officers constructed and gave meaning to the concept, including who they considered vulnerable and which forms of vulnerability they most readily recognised. The chapter also highlights the variability and ambiguity within these definitions.

Chapter Seven explores how neighbourhood officers identified vulnerable people. It examines the interpretive and practical processes through which vulnerability became visible, analysing the forms of knowledge and methods upon which officers drew. In doing so, the chapter advances understanding of how vulnerability is recognised and assessed in frontline policing.

Chapter Eight examines how neighbourhood officers responded to vulnerable people and analyses the forms, logics and effects of these responses. It also considers the constraints and limitations that shaped officers' activities, thereby contributing to wider debates about the scope, capacity and role of policing in managing and addressing vulnerability.

Chapter Nine synthesises the key findings and themes of the thesis. It situates the findings within wider academic and policy debates, outlines the study's contributions to knowledge and identifies potential areas for future research.

Chapter Two: Situating the concept of vulnerability in its theoretical, social policy and policing contexts

This chapter outlines the key ideas and debates that inform the meaning and operationalisation of vulnerability in theory, social policy and policing. It provides a comprehensive account of vulnerability that underpins and situates the thesis's empirical exploration of vulnerability in the neighbourhood policing setting. Also, by examining the concept's multifaceted dimensions and tensions, the chapter demonstrates the importance of studying how vulnerability is understood, implemented and experienced in practice.

The chapter is split into three main sections, each of which corresponds to one of the aforementioned contexts. The first, entitled vulnerability in theory, begins by addressing definitions of the concept, exploring the meanings ascribed to it through reference to its key cognate concepts: risk, (in)security, resilience and capacity. The section then outlines three dominant theories of vulnerability: universal, situational and pluralistic vulnerability.

The second section examines how notions and debates of vulnerability have manifested within and been informed by key social policy agendas. It illustrates how the theoretical ambiguity and ambivalence of vulnerability transfer into the policy context. Specifically, it identifies the concept's paradoxical capacity to accommodate both 'opportunities and oppressions in society', depending on the context and ways in which it is mobilised (Brown, 2024: 288).

The final section examines vulnerability in policing. It considers vulnerability as a longstanding focus of police work, embedded in core functions such as welfare provision, order maintenance and risk management. It explains how vulnerability has always been relevant to policing, which it situates as a practice historically reflective of patterns of social marginalisation and shaped by occupational cultures. Finally, vulnerability as a contemporary operational lens is explored, outlining the rationale behind its recent prominence and the implications of this shift for the remit and work of the police.

2.1. Vulnerability in theory

Towards the end of the 20th century, the academic field of environmental science became the first to interrogate vulnerability as a critical concept, originally doing so as a means of exploring and explaining the conditions and consequences of natural hazards and disasters (Wisner and Luce, 1993; Watts and Bohle, 1993). Since then, vulnerability has garnered prodigious attention across many other disciplines, including public health, economic studies

and the social sciences (Wisner, 2016). It is therefore widely regarded as transdisciplinary (Brown, 2024: 300–301).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the growing academic interest in vulnerability, its meaning is contested and no universal definition of the term exists. Scholars have interpreted this absence in various ways. Some deem it to be helpful, equipping vulnerability with a 'looseness' that preserves its applicability and value across disciplines, space and time (Cummins, 2019: 86). For Green (2007: 94), the search for and application of a rigid definition is undesirable because it increases the risk of research falling into a 'positivist trap' whereby critical social processes related to vulnerability, such as labelling certain people as victims, may be overlooked.

Hurst (2008) argues that the absence of a single accepted definition of vulnerability stems from the nature of the concept itself. She (2008: 192) likens the task of defining vulnerability to a group of blind people describing an 'elephant in the room'. Because every person touches 'different parts of the elephant's anatomy', each has a unique interpretation and thus the group cannot reach a shared definition (Wallbank and Herring, 2014: 3). The metaphor illustrates the challenge of defining vulnerability because, like the elephant, vulnerability too is perceived in unique ways; its meaning is contingent on who is defining it and the context in which it is being defined (Brown et al., 2017; Gilson, 2024). On this logic, Cunha and Garrafa (2016: 205) contend that interpretations of vulnerability should emerge through 'a continuous dynamic process that is open to dialogue', and hence they recommend that the quest to establish a fixed definition be abandoned.

The case in favour of securing a settled definition of vulnerability has also received support. Citing Hurst (2008: 191) again, she flags a problematic dimension to the uncertainty in readings of vulnerability: 'although we agree that this notion has a strong pull, we cannot account for this pull, justify it, or define its limits'. Indeed, the unclear parameters of vulnerability leave it open to being subjectively, and therefore inconsistently, interpreted and applied (Keay and Kirby, 2018). Its ambiguity has raised doubts as to its analytical value and practical contribution (Fawcett, 2009; Daniel, 2010) and prompted calls for more precise and consistent definitions of vulnerability to be developed (Keay and Kirby, 2018; Enang et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, ongoing debates as to the meaning of vulnerability remain a prominent and dynamic feature of the field. Amid these debates, a plethora of approaches attempting to make sense of the term have emerged. The remainder of this section explores the most influential of these. While the objective here is to explore the meaning of vulnerability, it is worth acknowledging that the calls to decentre the pursuit of a definition do offer cogent rationales. Indeed, it is a valid concern that narrowly defining vulnerability may, for example,

diminish its multidisciplinary value and/or distract attention away from its underpinning forces. Regardless, it remains necessary to establish meaning to equip this thesis with an understanding of the concept that can be researched and that is informed by, and situated within, existing knowledge. To balance these considerations, the following adopts a relatively overarching approach to conceptualising vulnerability.

2.1.1. Defining vulnerability through its key cognate concepts

The concept of vulnerability has seldom been investigated in isolation. Instead, it is usually given substance via 'a web of other interrelated concepts', among which risk, (in)security, resilience, and capacity are prevalent (Gilson, 2021: 87). This section explores these other concepts to examine how they shape ideas of vulnerability. It proceeds from the view that vulnerability is, in theory and practice, relational, affected by and emerging through its interactions with other conditions. As such, accounts of vulnerability should recognise how it is intertwined with its cognate concepts.

Much like vulnerability, these other concepts are multidisciplinary and carry distinct meanings, objectives and assumptions in different contexts.[1] Notwithstanding the conceptual and contextual nuances of these concepts, the purpose here is to establish how they contribute to and inform understandings of vulnerability in the broad social science context of this thesis. Therefore, rather than engaging in extensive histories and analyses of these other concepts, the section draws upon them in a generalised and integrative way.

2.1.1.1. Vulnerability, risk and (in)security

Vulnerability has been defined as 'the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally' (Oxford University Press, 2025). Etymologically, the word vulnerable derives from the Latin noun 'vulnus' meaning 'wound', and the verb 'vulnerare' meaning 'to wound' (Spiers, 2000). In the same vein, vulnerable people have been conceptualised as those who are 'easily harmed' (Harmon, 2015: 1), exposed to 'a high probability of damage' (Forbes-Mewett and Nguyen-Trung, 2019: 19) and 'liable to damage or harm' (Rogers, 1997: 65). Elsewhere, risk has been described as the condition of being 'threatened by harm' (Pelling, 2003: 5) and defined in the dictionary as the '([e]xposure

[1] For an exploration of different disciplinary approaches to risk see Cordona (2004). For an analysis of cross-disciplinary ideas about security see Crawford and Hutchinson (2016).

to) the possibility of loss, injury, or other adverse or unwelcome circumstance' (Oxford University Press, 2025).

These definitions make clear the connection between vulnerability and risk through their shared themes of the exposure to harm and the potentiality and actuality of experiencing harm. The fact that the concepts are frequently drawn upon in unison, and sometimes even 'equated' (Spiers, 2000: 716), reinforces the apparentness of this connection (Appleton, 1999; Kemshall, 2002; Virokannas et al., 2020). Accordingly, vulnerability and risk have been described as 'conceptual cousin[s]' (Brown et al., 2017: 497) and 'two sides of the same coin' (Beck, 2009: 178). By way of illustration, Green's (2007: 92) 'Axis of Vulnerability' presents an interdependent relationship between the concepts by suggesting that the extent to which someone is at risk of crime and harmed by crime directly informs the degree to which they may be vulnerable.

Elsewhere, scholars have differentiated between vulnerability and risk (Chiland, 1974; Wisner, 2004; Havrilla, 2017). For Rose and Killian (1983), risk is determined by environmental factors while vulnerability concerns individual characteristics. Sarewitz et al. (2003: 805) reiterate this interpretation, framing risk in reference to the likelihood of a certain outcome occurring and vulnerability as relating to the features of a system (or person) that 'create the potential for harm'. The different functions of risk and vulnerability are depicted by Anthony's (1974, cited in Rose and Killian, 1983) doll analogy developed in his research into vulnerable and invulnerable children. He describes how three dolls, each made from a different material (i.e. level of vulnerability), are exposed to the same hammer strike (i.e. risk). The same strike leaves the steel doll unharmed, marks the plastic doll and shatters the glass doll. Though such work ultimately distinguishes between risk and vulnerability, the concepts are nonetheless presented as sharing a close transactional relationship.

The concepts of security and its antonym insecurity are relevant to this discussion. Security has been defined as the 'low probability of damage to acquired values' (Baldwin, 1997: 13) and 'a situation in which a specific set of dangers is counteracted or minimised' (Giddens, 1990: 35–36). As the inverse of such conditions, insecurity regards the instance or potential instance of heightened damage or danger. Conditions of insecurity can apply to the future as well as the present, in accordance with, for example, the unpredictability of life (Misztal, 2011), the emergence of unsafe environments (Wisner et al., 2012) and the lack of knowledge about, and possible risk involved in, future crises (Emmel and Hughes, 2010). Therefore, akin to vulnerability, insecurity too is shaped by risk-related forces and the related exposure, susceptibility and openness to harm (Kottow, 2003; Aven, 2011; Baiasu, 2020). Oftentimes

this exposure is understood as a state of 'precarity' (Butler, 2004; 2009; Birkmann et al., 2013; Gilson, 2014; 2021). For Adams and Serpe (2000: 621), conditions of vulnerability compound insecurity and vice versa, hence their relationship constitutes something of an 'escalating loop'. The direct interconnectivity between the concepts is portrayed well in Anthony's (1974, cited in Rose and Killian, 1983) doll analogy: invulnerable children, represented through the resistant steel doll, are more secure against the impacts of environmental forces, yet vulnerable children are less secure against harm from the same exposure, hence the glass doll breaking.

2.1.1.2. Vulnerability, resilience and capacity

The concepts of resilience and capacity represent two further 'key factors that influence the outcomes associated with vulnerability' (Havrilla, 2017: 64; Aven, 2011). Bracke (2016: 54) defines resilience as 'the ability of a substance or object to bounce back and spring into prior shape'. In the context of people, resilience regards one's ability to cope with, adapt to and overcome hardship and prosper 'in the face of significant adversity' (Schoon, 2006: 6). As Gilligan (2000: 37) corroborates, resilience concerns 'the capacity to do well despite adverse experience'.

Vulnerability is often perceived through a lens of resilience and capacity on the basis that one's compromised resilience, described by Harrison (2008: 427) as 'unpower', can diminish their coping capacities and enhance their exposure to risk and insecurity, making them more vulnerable (Wisner et al., 2004; Adger, 2006; Proag, 2014). McKeown et al. (2022: 115) illustrate the relationship between vulnerability and compromised resilience by suggesting that both regard '"disturbances" to current states of affairs'. For Wisner (2016), one's vulnerability should be defined and measured directly by their ability (or lack thereof) to anticipate, manage, cope with and react to risk, i.e. their resilience.

Kaplan (2002: 19) highlights how vulnerability and resilience are often treated as lying at 'opposite poles of a continuum'. The veracity of this binary approach has been challenged (Butler et al., 2016). For example, Dobson (2015: 3) identifies a subtle distinction between the concepts and hence refutes the idea of them being opposites: while vulnerability refers to the factors which influence one's capacities to cope or recover, resilience relates to the interplay of the factors enabling those capacities. Moreover, Walklate (2011: 181) notes how exposure to adversity (i.e. vulnerability) 'does not necessarily imply an inability to cope with that adversity'. Cutter (2016: 111) reiterates this sentiment, stating how '[c]ommunities and the social groups contained within them can be highly vulnerable, but that does not mean they lack resilience'. In fact, some scholars suggest that vulnerability may even contribute to, rather than

erode, a community's resilience by reinforcing a shared sense of belonging and connection between its members, especially within marginalised groups (Gonzalez et al., 2021; Quinn et al., 2021). Gao and Sai's (2021) work into experiences of racism during the coronavirus pandemic illustrates this scope. In their investigation of whether vulnerability could be used positively by 'the vulnerable… to shift the moment of helplessness', the authors (2021: 183, 188) concluded that the concept has the capacity to help people 'to heal, to calm down, and to find meanings in [their] lived experiences'.

Taking Sections 2.1.1.1. and 2.1.1.2. together reveal how vulnerability is often situated as a concept with two interconnected 'sides': on one sits a heightened exposure to or experience of risk and on the other is a reduced capacity to cope with, manage or recover from that risk (Chambers, 1989: 33; Forbes-Mewett and Nguyen-Trung, 2019). Indeed, vulnerability has been variously defined as the 'exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulty coping with them' (Chambers, 1989: 33), the 'exposure to risk and an inability to avoid or absorb potential harm' (Pelling, 2003: 5) and a 'product of the harms caused… minus the capacity to respond to those harms' (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021: 23).

This section mapped out the conceptual dynamics implied within and evoked by the notion of vulnerability. It established how common framings of vulnerability situate the concept as a mark of difference or exceptionality, whether that be in relation to increased risk and insecurity, diminished resilience and capacity or a combination of these conditions. While this discussion adopted an exogenous approach by defining vulnerability with reference to other concepts, the next three sections, which outline the influential theories of vulnerability, enlist a more endogenous lens, narrowing the focus toward the concept itself.

2.1.2. Universal vulnerability

Universal vulnerability theory situates vulnerability as an inherent and assured trait of humanity (Butler, 2004; 2009; Fineman, 2008; 2013). It argues that the nature and experience of human life can be defined through the 'universal and constant vulnerability' to which every individual is exposed (Fineman and Grear, 2013: 2). For proponents of this theory, vulnerability is 'core to the very nature of what it means to be human' (Keay and Kirby, 2018: 429).

Universal vulnerability stems, in part, from human corporeality (Fineman, 2008; Gilson, 2014). Our mortality illustrates this: every human body is vulnerable to death because every person's material existence will at some point cease (Brown et al., 2017: 504). Corporeality denotes universal vulnerability during the life course too because every living person

experiences an ‘ever-present possibility of harm, injury, and misfortune’ (Fineman, 2008: 9). Certain shared human traits demonstrate this; for instance: ‘we all bleed when cut’ (Rogers et al., 2012: 12). By focusing on the inherent ‘fragile materiality’ of humanity (Fineman, 2008: 12), the theory frames vulnerability in terms of risk and insecurity (2.1.1.1.) and situates these all as ubiquitous and inevitable conditions of human life.

Universal vulnerability stems from social factors as well as human physicality due to the inherent interdependency of people (Fineman, 2008; 2019; Butler et al., 2016; Sabsay, 2016). Rogers et al. (2012: 19) state how ‘we are both dependent on the care and support of other people… and vulnerable to the actions of others’. The notion that every individual’s existence is affected by other people reveals how our shared social vulnerability transacts with our shared physical vulnerability. As Fineman (2008: 12) observes, the ongoing risk of harm to which people are exposed signals the ongoing ‘potential for each of us to become dependent based upon our persistent susceptibility to misfortune and catastrophe’. Disability studies have influenced these ideas by exposing how the prospects of health-related vulnerabilities during one’s lifespan signal the innate fragility of personhood (Beckett, 2006; Turner, 2006).

The universal vulnerability theory has been credited for detaching vulnerability as a condition of specific, often marginalised, groups (Fineman, 2010: 266; Rosenblum, 2011: 141; Gilson, 2021: 88). Vulnerability has commonly been framed alongside notions of deficiency, weakness, dependency and failings, essentially depicting it as a ‘negative state of being that one must avoid at all costs’ (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021: 18; Brown, 2011; ten Have, 2015). Such framings have been criticised for being rooted within ‘a paternalistic discourse’ that can serve to stigmatise, marginalise and harm vulnerable individuals (Robinson, 2023: 6; Fawcett, 2009). By accepting everyone as vulnerable, the universal vulnerability theory serves to reclaim dependency as a positive shared trait that signals and facilitates human connection, thus destabilising the concept’s scope to stigmatise and ostracise certain people labelled as vulnerable (Fineman, 2008; 2012).

Despite such praise, the theory has also garnered concerns about its ethical implications. Cole (2016: 262) considers how framing everyone as vulnerable can risk ‘dilut[ing] perceptions of inequality and muddl[ing] important distinctions’ by underplaying the disparate ways in which historical, structural and political inequalities affect and harm different people. Robinson (2023: 16) reiterates this by suggesting how the theory risks ‘eras[ing] or flattening… the specificity of life trajectories’. Moreover, by accepting vulnerability as inevitable and potentially minimising the individualities of lived experience, the theory may offer justifications for not tackling the social structures and inequalities that create and reinforce vulnerability (Brown, 2011: 318-319).

Questions of this theory's practical applicability have also been raised due to its potential to be 'dangerously abstract' (Murphy, 2012: 65) and 'too nebulous to be meaningful' (Levine et al., 2004: 46). This is pertinent in social policy. A moral duty to provide special care is clearly owed to vulnerable people (2.2.). By understanding vulnerability as universal, the concept loses its ability to signal to where most care is needed, producing a potentially 'over-inclusive approach' that risks 'dull[ing] our responses to particular vulnerabilities' (Rogers et al., 2012: 16). Thus, some have advocated for vulnerability to be used in a more targeted way that reflects disparities in society and facilitates resources to be allocated accordingly (Hurst, 2008; Kohn, 2014).

The universal vulnerability theory arguable makes valuable contributions by challenging the negative connotations of vulnerability through recognising the inherent fragility and dependency of humanity and the shared baseline level of vulnerability that these traits reveal. Yet its usefulness is limited by its scope to overlook inequalities, underestimate the differences between people and insufficiently inform decisions that reflect such diversity. Thus, it is important to develop thinking beyond the point of universal vulnerability to respond to the fact that experiences and conditions of vulnerability vary between contexts. The situational perspective, discussed next, accommodates this recognition.

2.1.3. Situational vulnerability

Situational vulnerability theory frames vulnerability as intensified by the particular conditions surrounding certain people and places, meaning it emerges in context-specific and heterogeneous forms (Gilson, 2014). Scholars have grouped the factors that shape situational vulnerability into two broad types. These have been variously labelled as the individual and the situational (Keay and Kirby, 2018; Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021), the inherent and the acquired (Havrilla, 2017) and the natural and the situational (Virokannas et al., 2020). At their core, these categorisations separate factors that stem from within an individual or group from those that arise from external circumstances.

The internal characteristics linked to vulnerability are typically discussed through the 'proxy variables' of age and sex (Killias, 1990: 98). Research into sex and gender has explored how vulnerability manifests in particular ways for women (Jordan et al., 2010; Araújo and Gatto, 2022; McIlwaine et al., 2022) and men (Durón Delfín and Leach, 2022; Kreft Agerberg, 2024). Research on age and vulnerability has examined both elderly people (Brogden and Nijar, 2000; Schröder-Butterfill and Marianti, 2006) and young people (Morgan and Zedner, 1992). Among older adults, vulnerability is often associated with the diminishment of coping abilities and

cognitive and functional capacities that can accompany ageing (Barbosa et al., 2019). Research into young people has conceptualised their vulnerability in relation to limited life experience and a relatively underdeveloped capacity for rational decision-making (Francis-Oliviero, 2023). Adolescence has been identified as a period marked especially by complexity and uncertainty (Gorur, 2015). The literature also identifies illness and disability (Roulstone et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2016), physical and mental health (Rader and Cossman, 2011; Enang et al., 2019) and sexual orientation (Wager, 2015) as personal attributes potentially shaping situational vulnerability.

The external factors influencing vulnerability most often tie to theories and conditions of marginalisation. For many scholars, vulnerability does not exist in a vacuum nor as a passive condition but is rather constructed, contingent on and shaped by wider social forces that dictate how vulnerable a person or group may be (Wisner, 2013; Biswas and Nautiyal, 2023; Brown et al., 2024). For Siller and Aydin (2022: 11), vulnerability constitutes 'a product of structures and systems [responsible for] creating adversity' among marginalised people. For example, class and socio-economic status (Genn, 1988; Fineman, 2012) and experiences of poverty (Thomas and Williams, 2013; Lewis and Lewis, 2014; Lister, 2016) are widely cited as external conditions affecting vulnerability. Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron (2021: 22) capture well the notion that vulnerability is, at least in part, socially constructed by asserting that it constitutes 'a consequence of the environments through which we pass'.

External factors contributing to situational vulnerability can regard environmental conditions (Forbes-Mewett and Nguyen-Trung, 2019; Siller and Aydin, 2022). Place-based vulnerability has been indicated in the context of, for example, the occupation of inadequate or unsafe housing (Palmer et al., 2012) and the relationship between living in certain neighbourhoods and residents' risk of harm (Wilson and Kelling, 1982; Innes and Fielding, 2002; Innes and Innes, 2013). In Cutter's (1996: 530) 'hazards-of-place' model, vulnerability, defined as 'a potential for loss', is understood as unequally distributed because it results from the dynamic relationship between the specific social forces and biophysical traits of individual areas. Similarly, Pelling (2003: 5) frames 'human vulnerability' as the product of physical geographical vulnerabilities interacting with social vulnerabilities relating to people and social systems. The relationship between vulnerability and environment is important to this thesis due to its focus on neighbourhood policing whose priorities and practices are designed to be informed by the conditions and demands of individual communities (Chapter Three).

Despite the literary tendency to segregate the personal and external factors of situational vulnerability, these binary categories do not reflect well the nature of lived experience. This is because vulnerability is shaped not only by personal *and* social factors but also, crucially, by

the interrelationship *between* them (Luna, 2009; Bartkowiak-Théron and Asquith, 2012; Keay and Kirby, 2018). For instance, personal factors relating to health and disabilities can intersect with social conditions relating to inadequate environmental resources and low economic status (Flaskerud and Winslow, 1998; Smith et al., 2016). Furthermore, while gender is often treated as a marker of vulnerability and, for instance, women are traditionally framed as inherently more vulnerable than men, their exposure to risk is informed by overarching social patriarchal norms (Richardson-Self, 2018). Hence, women's vulnerability can be understood as in fact more 'tied to gender norms' and less an innate trait of the 'female psyche' (Kellezi and Reicher, 2014: 502).

Kallman's (2019: 1) study of gender and race further illustrates the complex interplay between internal and external factors and how it shapes experiences of vulnerability. While both characteristics influenced the experiences of white women and women of colour, they ultimately did so differently, producing outcomes that were 'similar and yet instructively different'. Additionally, although skin colour and cultural background may be predetermined, race itself is a social construct (Radar and Cossman, 2011). Research consistently shows that people of colour and minoritised ethnic groups face heightened vulnerability not because of inherent traits, but because racist social systems position whiteness as the normative standard (Dyer, 1997; Reskin, 2012). These structural dynamics underpin race-based discrimination across multiple domains, including workplaces (Hirsh and Kornrich, 2008), sport (Collins, 1998) and access to state support (Ford, 2016; Long, 2018; Section 2.2.3.).

The finding that vulnerability is more than just an inherent trait of certain people and instead also something that is produced and compounded through wide-ranging intersecting social factors has been corroborated across many contexts. These include research into homelessness (Ivanich and Warner, 2019; Kyprianides and Bradford, 2024), sex workers (Brown et al., 2024), children and youths (Brown, 2015; 2019) and young people with mental health issues (Varnfield, 2005), those diagnosed with conditions of neurodivergence (Anthony and Bills, 2021) and those exposed to adverse childhood experiences (Boullier and Blair, 2018).

The fact that social conditions and systems can reinforce the vulnerability of already vulnerable people raises questions about policing (as an external process) and its scope to harm those with whom they interact. In this context, Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron (2021: 24) consider the concept of 'Iatrogenic (or System-Generated) Vulnerability', a label invoked to describe the role played by criminal justice structures and practices in 'creating and extending the vulnerability of those that pass through the system'. Section 2.3 explores this topic by examining how policing practices can produce and intensify vulnerability among marginalised groups.

Framing vulnerability as a situational condition highlights how it is unevenly distributed in society and helps expose the structural causes and consequences of marginalisation and inequality. Yet this perspective also has its drawbacks. Because vulnerability is often associated with negative ideas of deficiency or incapacity (2.1.2.), the situational perspective risks essentialising vulnerability as a fixed characteristic of certain groups and attaching negative connotations to them. By doing so, it may reinforce the very stigma and marginalisation it seeks to explain (Tyler, 2013a; Gilson, 2014; Baiasu, 2020).

The situational perspective also risks minimising the dynamic nature of vulnerability. Conditions of vulnerability are susceptible to change (Gilson, 2024). When the label of vulnerable is imposed as a 'blanket attachment to social groups', the degree to which 'vulnerability is lived, experienced, and harnessed, or otherwise, in a variety of ways' risks being overlooked (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021: 9). Relatedly, this categorisation may be unhelpfully deterministic. As Menichelli (2019: 701) notes, perspectives that assume 'vulnerability can be neatly recognized and categorized are flawed' because they fail to acknowledge the vulnerability of people who do not fit within the prescribed categories (2.2.3.; 2.2.4.). Moreover, the deterministic lens may present certain people as inevitably vulnerable, thus perhaps underemphasising the importance of working to dismantle the social forces that produce and sustain that vulnerability (Rogers et al., 2012: 12; Koch, 2015: 141).

Despite variations in their theoretical bases, universal vulnerability and situational vulnerability both offer a fixed way of imposing labels of vulnerability, either broadly to encompass everyone (i.e. universal) or narrowly, upon certain people (i.e. situational). These rigid approaches restrict the extent to which either theory (in isolation at least) can encapsulate the concept's complexities (Gilson, 2024: 261). Yet it is also true that tenets of both theories make valid and useful contributions to understanding vulnerability. There is, therefore, cause to develop them in a way that combines and emphasises their respective strengths while subduing their limitations. The pluralistic vulnerability theory seeks to achieve this.

2.1.4. Pluralistic vulnerability

The pluralist approach recognises vulnerability as constituted and experienced in distinct and interrelated ways and thus depicts the concept as a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon (Gilson, 2021; 2024). The perspective challenges (and provides an alternative to) the traditional, one-dimensional approaches which, as illustrated above, generally frame vulnerability through mutually exclusive or opposed dimensions, such as universal *or* situational, a matter of risk *or* security and dictated by weakness *or* resilience (Gilson, 2024:

263). For Gilson (2024), six interconnecting aspects underpin the pluralistic perspective. The following outlines these.

Firstly, the pluralistic theory understands vulnerability as universal and situationally affected (Rogers et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2017). This a popular view, supported even by proponents of universal vulnerability. As Fineman (2019: 357) remarks, the 'differences among individuals… do not alter the fundamental vulnerability that marks all bodies but have certainly served to provoke profound social advantage or disadvantage'. Likewise, Butler et al. (2016: 4) accept that vulnerability, despite its universality, remains 'unevenly distributed' with certain groups experiencing 'disproportionate exposure to risks'. Gilson (2024: 262) captures this well when she describes vulnerability as 'shared by all and… a distinct experience, different for everyone'.

Secondly, the pluralistic approach frames vulnerability as material and social, comprising both tangible and quantifiable factors regarding physical susceptibility to harm and matters of affectivity involving intersubjective emotions and experiences shaped by social meanings, perceptions and expectations (Gilson, 2024: 264). Vulnerability is therefore both objective and subjective and can also regard events that have happened and any contingencies that might happen in the future (Gilson, 2021: 93). This connects to the third trait of pluralistic vulnerability: temporality.

Perceiving vulnerability as temporal highlights the concept's 'variability' (Gilson, 2014: 67), existing in the present and 'inflected by history and orientated towards the future' (Gilson, 2021: 93). Hence, we are all exposed to vulnerability at different times and in various ways (Cole, 2016; Brown et al., 2017). This perspective thus detaches vulnerability as a label assigned to certain groups, rendering it 'destigmatised' and more inclusive (Ford et al., 2024: 132). The temporal aspect also disputes the presumed correlation between vulnerability and inevitable harm by depicting vulnerability as an 'open-ended condition', noting the possibility of anticipated harm not materialising to the expected extent or at all (Gilson, 2014: 37-38). Moreover, framing vulnerability as temporal reveals its transformative potential; where outcomes of vulnerability have not yet manifested, there is room for intervention and resolution (Rogers et al., 2012: 13).

Fourthly, the pluralistic theory highlights vulnerability's ambivalence and ambiguity (Cole, 2016; Gilson, 2021). For Gilson (2024: 264), the concept's ambivalence regards its capacity to produce 'opposing values such as care and injury', while its ambiguity reveals how opposing ideas, like 'agency and vulnerability, for instance — can be experienced simultaneously'. Therefore, this lens foregrounds vulnerability in 'an inclusive both/and logic rather than an

exclusive either/or logic', countering the tendency to mark neat segregations between interpretations, categories and experiences of vulnerability (Gilson, 2021: 90).

Fifthly, this perspective suggests that vulnerability is relational and socially mediated, shaped through people's interactions with wider social, political and environmental systems (Rogers et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2017). It reiterates the fact that, while vulnerability may be shared, it is not necessarily 'mutual or symmetrical' (Munro and Scholar, 2012: 196). Resultantly, it treats vulnerability as dynamic and multidimensional, rather than as a static label (Kirby, 2006; Luna, 2009; ten Have, 2015). Importantly, this directs attention to the social structures and processes that affect vulnerability (Brown, 2011; Dehaghani, 2021).

Lastly, the pluralistic approach recognises vulnerability as an ethical and political concept (Rogers et al., 2012; Cole, 2016). Ethically, vulnerability can constitute a basis for obligations between people to care, support and hold moral responsibility towards one another (Gilson, 2024: 265). Politically, it acts as a ground for political responsibility by calling for protective and empowering policies and it is an object of political struggle and contention (Gilson, 2024: 265). Later discussion explores how these dimensions emerge in the social policy (2.2.) and policing (2.3.).

In sum, the pluralistic lens compiles together the manifold dimensions of vulnerability in a way that emphasises their dynamic and interconnected states. It challenges the negative connotations of the concept and indicates its positive potential as a platform upon which community, resilience and social justice can be pursued. At the same time, it recognises the concept's relational, ambivalent and ambiguous nature, remaining critically attuned to how framings and mobilisations of vulnerability can create harm.

2.1.5. Section summary

Despite the lack of consensus as to its precise meaning, it is generally accepted that, beyond the inherent vulnerability of human corporeality, vulnerability manifests in heterogeneous ways between different people, places and moments. The varied ways in which individuals are exposed to, experience and cope with conditions of risk and adversity signal the uneven distribution of human structure and agency. This is important in the context of policing. As Section 2.3. examines, police-citizen interactions virtually always involve dimensions of vulnerability, not least because of the power imbalances that characterise them, with police typically occupying positions of authority and citizens – especially those already marginalised – in positions of relative weakness (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021).

It is also important to recognise that ideas of vulnerability, including those outlined here, reflect evolving academic, public and political discourses, thus they have shifted and continue to shift over time. The following section illustrates this point by examining how different social and political ideologies and agendas have shaped, and been shaped by, changing understandings of vulnerability, and how these understandings have influenced forms of state intervention in relation to vulnerable people.

2.2. Vulnerability in social policy

Within social policy, vulnerability is alleged to have, '[s]omewhat by stealth' (Brown, 2017: 667), become 'institutionalised' (McLaughlin, 2012: 113). Robinson (2023: 7) observes how the concept has emerged as 'the policy placeholder', not just nationally but across Western societies more generally. Indeed, vulnerability holds global influence, informing 'interventions and approaches to social problems, both in the UK and internationally' (Brown et al., 2017: 497). Although this section concentrates on the national context to reflect the focus of this thesis, it is worth noting that some ideas drawn upon in British social policy and outlined here have international footings.

As Section 2.1. suggested, vulnerability can serve as a signal of atypical levels of risk, 'injury and injustice' and can therefore point to 'where the practical work of protection, care and repair is needed' (Robinson, 2023: 16). A widely discussed idea here regards the duty of care held by the state to vulnerable people (Fineman, 2010; 2019; Aliverti, 2020). This is because, while individuals may lack the means to manage their vulnerabilities independently, the extensive wealth and power of the state equip it with more capability to provide the necessary support and solutions (Fineman, 2019: 362–363). Armed with such power, the state has a responsibility to be responsive and 'react positively' to the needs of its citizens, especially those with less resources and those who face the most adversity (Hewer, 2015: 465). For Fineman (2013: 23; 2019: 363), state institutions are 'assets' that can allow people to redress issues and 'accrue the resources they need to have resilience'.

While vulnerability represents a powerful concept through which justifications of state intervention are made, the forms and political, ethical and practical implications of these interventions are much disputed (Brown, 2015; 2024; Mitchell, 2020). For Aliverti (2020: 1120), the 'amorphous content and malleable contours' of vulnerability impart upon the concept the power to justify and legitimise various interventions, which may be of both 'very different types' (Ecclestone, 2017: 51) and 'potentially infinite in scope and application' (Dunn et al., 2008: 241).

This section explores the political and moral meanings and uses of vulnerability in the social policy context of welfare governance. It examines how the concept has operated as a justificatory device for state intervention and mechanism through which people are positioned as deserving or undeserving of support. By understanding how vulnerability operates as an organising concept and governing category in social policy, the discussion provides critical context for understanding its mobilisation in neighbourhood policing. This is because the ways in which vulnerability is operationalised in policing do not occur in isolation; they are shaped by wider policy trends, governance logics and public debates. The following section outlines the key themes and tensions within vulnerability-centred social policy, beginning with early engagements between vulnerability and welfare-state provision before tracing subsequent developments in which vulnerability has been deployed both as a trigger for intervention and as a classificatory tool.

2.2.1. Exploring vulnerability in welfare state debates

Deacon (2002: 4) defines a welfare-state society as one whose 'government accepts responsibility for ensuring that all its citizens receive a minimum income and have access to the highest possible provision in the fields of healthcare, housing, education and personal social services'. The British welfare state emerged in the aftermath of World War II and bestowed upon people certain rights designed to protect them 'from the cradle to the grave' (Lowe, 1999: 13). It followed the recognition that, firstly, in society there are structural inequalities which expose and compound vulnerability and, secondly, the state has a duty to rectify these imbalances, especially for citizens who lack the means to protect themselves independently (Pedersen, 1993: 5; Thane, 2018: 105). Impelled on both political and moral grounds then, the welfare state's inception was informed by an acknowledgement of vulnerability as a condition shaped by social systems, distributed unevenly and deserving of a government response.

Despite being premised upon the pursuit of collective security and solidarity, the welfare state received backlash, catalysed by a period of economic stagnation in post-war Britain (White, 2003). Criticisms of the state's provision of welfare coalesced upon far-Right, neoliberal ideologies that framed vulnerability as an individual failing resulting from poor use of free will (Murray, 1996a; 1996b). Within these debates, the notion of the 'underclass' emerged as a pervasive rhetorical device.[2] This label was assigned to groups perceived as engaging in

[2] The 'underclass' concept has gone through various nomenclatures over time. Macnicol (2017: 99–

'unorthodox' behaviours that trapped them in disadvantageous and socially undesirable lifestyles (Jencks, 1989: 14, cited in Lister, 1996: 3). Research in this realm alleged links between poverty, poor education, unemployment, criminality and unconventional or 'broken' family structures (Wedge, 1982; Kiernan and Estaugh, 1993; Kiernan, 1995; Dennis, 1997).

The work of Charles Murray (1996a; 1996b; 2006) has been particularly influential in informing and entrenching ideas of the 'underclass'. Exploring the reasons that people experience poverty, Murray (1996a: 25; 2006: 29) argued that this previously 'homogenised' population could be segregated between those not responsible for their hardships and those who were. He claimed that the latter group, termed the 'underclass', opted into their experiences of adversity through their behavioural choices which were incentivised and rewarded by state welfare provisions. Hence, according to Murray, such provisions erode individual accountability and foster a 'culture of dependency' among citizens (Pierson, 1994). This perspective considered personal self-governance, rather than wider structural forces, to be the creator of (and resolution to) social inequality (Mead, 1982; Murray, 1996a). Through this lens, state support for certain people was seen as an inappropriate overreaching of government involvement (Deacon, 2002: 31). The concept of the 'underclass' thus ostensibly provided the state with a reason to retrench welfare provision and impel people to manage their own vulnerabilities.

Bolstered by this context, two closely related political agendas emerged in the later decades of the 20th century: conditionality and communitarianism. Both agendas contend that citizens' access to state support should be an earned privilege rather than a default right (Dwyer, 1998). In terms of the former, conditionality promotes active models of citizenship by implying a contract between the government and citizens. This contract holds that citizens who comply with society's laws and norms will be rewarded with rights (Deacon, 2000; Dwyer, 2004).

Among the governments often associated with conditional welfare agendas is Tony Blair's New Labour party (Dwyer, 1998). Shortly before becoming Prime Minister, Blair (1995: 5) said: 'Duty is the cornerstone of a decent society… The rights we receive should reflect the duties we owe. With the power should come responsibility'. New Labour's 'Welfare to Work' programme exemplified the pursuit of such an agenda, pledging to 'rebuild the welfare state around work' by increasing employment rates and cutting the number of people entitled to unemployment benefits (DSS, 1998: 23). Policies aimed at addressing homelessness, for instance, followed suit, with Blair (1995: 9) stating that whilst 'the state has a duty to house the homeless…, those who are housed by the state have a duty to behave responsibly… If

100) notes how, before becoming the 'underclass' in the 1980s, the group had been known as the 'residuum' of the 1880s, the 'social problem group' during the war years, the 'problem family' collective in the mid-20th century and the subject of the 'cycle of deprivation' in the 1970s.

tenants do not fulfil their side of the bargain… the contract is broken'. The same stance was maintained in a later paper (Home Office, 2004: 23) which stipulated that citizens 'should know the part they can play in keeping themselves, their families and their communities safe – and be encouraged to take action and responsibility themselves'.

Closely aligned with the principles of conditionality, communitarianism seeks to establish a balance between 'universal individual rights and the common good' by focusing upon the duties owed by citizens to their community (Etzioni, 1997: xviii). Etzioni (1995: 24) suggests that a so-called 'communitarian quest' surfaced under the government response to the 'self-centred, me-istic' culture that accompanied late-20th century capitalism. This period witnessed a 'cultural revolution' characterised by 'the triumph of the individual over society' (Hobsbawm, 1994: 334, cited in Loader and Mulcahy, 2003: 15). Among government attempts to recalibrate societal priorities back towards the wider community, Prime Minister at the time, Margaret Thatcher, said that 'no government can do anything except through people... It is our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbours' (The Guardian, 2013). By centralising individuals' social responsibilities, communitarianism challenges the notion that the state and welfare provision are (or should be) entwined (Slater, 2014).

These rightward turns within the welfare state did not go uncontested. A considerable body of scholarship emerging in the late 20th and early 21st centuries argued that individual agency and vulnerability are profoundly shaped by structural inequalities and hence they cannot be understood – or addressed – solely at the level of personal choice. This scholarship emphasised the need to recognise the state's responsibility for creating, sustaining and remedying the social conditions that produce vulnerability. The critiques laid the groundwork for what would become robust theoretical frameworks of vulnerability, as introduced in Section 2.1. A key contributor to this intellectual discourse was Martha Albertson Fineman (2008; 2010; 2013; 2019) whose universal vulnerability theory challenges the assumptions of conditional welfare by rejecting the moralisation of dependency and asserting vulnerability as a universal and inherent feature of humanity. Through this lens, neoliberal portrayals of dependency as a shameful or 'potentially humiliating condition' are destabilised (O'Neill, 2005: 93).

Such theories of vulnerability further illuminate how individuals' autonomy and life circumstances are shaped by external forces beyond their control and how, as Cummins (2019: 87) states, 'the right and power to make choices is not distributed evenly amongst individuals' (Fineman, 2008; 2013). From this perspective, the rigid moral distinction between the 'blameless' and 'blameworthy' individual – exemplified in constructions such as the 'underclass' – is challengeable, and the case for a responsive state that actively supports and cares for its citizens is strengthened.

This section explored how early debates about vulnerability have shaped, and been shaped by, the welfare state and its construction, development and contestation. Between its emergence as a mechanism of support and its evolvement under neoliberal-inspired configurations of state responsibility and the critical academic responses which followed, vulnerability has remained key to questions of what the state owes its citizens and why such duties exist. These questions spark further debates about who qualifies as vulnerable, what interventions may be justified in the name of vulnerability and what implications they carry for the subjects of vulnerability-centred policy. The remainer of Section 2.2. examines these questions.

2.2.2. Vulnerability as a trigger for 'special measures'

While much academic attention has been paid to understanding vulnerability as a universal human condition, in policy the concept is often operationalised in more selective ways, serving as a criterion through which to assess eligibility, identify those in need and legitimise and arrange the allocation of resources (Kohn, 2014). This section draws upon policies of recent decades to illustrate the state's deployment of vulnerability as a basis for the 'exceptional treatment' of people it deems to be vulnerable (Brown, 2024: 288). The following examples are extracted from the criminal justice domain to reflect the policing focus of the thesis, though special vulnerability-centred protections and measures span across many realms. These include cases of adults who are considered at risk of abuse[3] and radicalisation,[4] vulnerable children[5] and allocations of housing.[6] Measures introduced during the Coronavirus pandemic also illustrate the use of vulnerability as a trigger for special treatment.[7]

The concept of vulnerability has long been used as a justification for deviating from standard procedures within the criminal justice system (Dehaghani and Newman, 2017; Menichelli, 2019; Aliverti, 2020). This mobilisation is evident across various criminal justice policies and

[3] The Department of Health's 'No Secrets' guidance (2000) instructed local authorities to safeguard adults vulnerable to abuse. The policy was replaced by statutory guidance issued under the Care Act 2014 which explicitly codified the state's duty to vulnerable people.
[4] The 'Prevent Duty', established by the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, created a requirement for public bodies to work to identity those deemed vulnerable to radicalisation, prevent radicalisation and support the rehabilitation of at-risk individuals.
[5] The 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' guidance imposed a statutory duty on all organisations with children-related functions to work collaboratively to protect children. The Children Acts of 1989 and 2004 obliged local authorities to safeguard and promote local children's welfare. This duty is heightened for children with special educational needs and disabilities (Children and Families Act, 2014).
[6] Vulnerability is listed as a condition signalling 'priority need' in legislation of housing allocation (Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, 1977).
[7] During the pandemic, the specific category of 'clinically extremely vulnerable' was created to ensure that those who qualified received additional protection and services, such as priority access to food deliveries and tailored communication from the government (DHSC, 2020).

laws, the emergence of which, Jacobson (2017: 4) suggests, has been 'gradual and piecemeal'. Such measures include the probation service, enacted under the Probation Act 1907 and set up to be a first resort system designed to support offenders and discourage reoffending. Shortly after, the Children Act 1908 created specific courts for young defendants, along with remand homes designed to 'keep them out of adult prisons' (Thane, 2018: 31).

In the criminal process, the Crown Prosecution Service (2019) have a duty to consider an individual's 'disorders, disabilities, impairments, injuries and diseases, which relate both to the brain and the mind' in deciding whether to prosecute. This illustrates a recognition of how certain conditions may affect people's behaviours, their culpability and, therefore, the appropriateness of prosecution. When determining sentences, practitioners are required consider the vulnerability of defendants, particularly in cases of children as they are recognised as 'inherently more vulnerable than adults due to their age' (Sentencing Council, 2017). Additionally, the NHS England Liaison and Diversion Programme's operating model (2014: 5) set up services to 'improve the health and justice outcomes' for those who encounter criminal justice institutions 'where a range of complex needs are identified as factors in their offending behaviour'. Special allowances in court are also made for witnesses and victims considered vulnerable (Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999; Home Office, 2002; Hall, 2009).

In policing, the 1984 Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) codified multiple measures designed to protect vulnerable people during police investigations. Reiner (2010: 84) identifies how the legislation was introduced under an attempt to balance the 'codification of police powers and safeguards over their exercise'. Among the measures brought in under PACE was the requirement for vulnerable people to be accompanied by an appropriate adult in interviews and when making statements, the prohibition of waiving legal advice without the agreement of an appropriate adult and the police duty to identify and record any suspected vulnerabilities of individuals. Such protections acknowledge and accommodate the disparities across people's autonomy levels during high-stake institutional encounters, with vulnerability acting as a legitimating principle for procedural alterations (Dehaghani, 2017; 2021).

These examples illustrate the use of vulnerability as a criterion and mechanism through which to justify the provision of special criminal justice measures for people deemed by the state as vulnerable. Such measures appear to reflect the premises of the welfare state in the sense that they indicate an approach under which inequalities are recognised, and redistributive social justice can be pursued (Brown, 2011; 2015). While such policies may be ostensibly inclusive and supportive, they prompt questions as to how, in practice, vulnerability is assessed or rather decided. The next section explores how vulnerability-centred policy, regardless of its wording, leaves space for practitioner discretion and bias to shape decisions of intervention.

2.2.3. Interpreting and categorising vulnerability: practitioner discretion and measuring worthiness

To claim that the state has a responsibility to care for vulnerable people is one thing. Establishing the parameters of vulnerability – that is to say, who qualifies as vulnerable – is another. Research finds that the processes through which practitioners make such assessments are not neutral (Brown 2015; Brown et al., 2017). Instead, they draw upon subjective interpretations, values, norms and beliefs shaped by cultural and ideological frames pertaining to deservedness and conformity (Gilson, 2024; Brown, 2024).

As Section 2.1. explored, the concept of vulnerability is widely regarded as ambiguous. In policy, definitions, thresholds and conditions of the term are sometimes given to indicate its boundaries and provide practical guidance. Examples provided in Section 2.2.2. demonstrate how young age and mental health conditions are exemplar factors recognised as capable of fulfilling vulnerability criteria and triggering special processes. While such traits may dispense some guidance, assuming that vulnerability can be organised into neat, fixed categories encourages an oversimplistic and exclusionary approach to understanding and responding to it (2.1.3.).

Amid the growing recognition of the complex and dynamic nature of vulnerability, there appears to be a shift towards expanding the scope of vulnerability to ensure that policy allows practitioners to adopt a more comprehensive approach to identifying and accommodating the needs of vulnerable people. For example, the reforms to the PACE Codes of Practice in 2018 expanded the definition of vulnerability from minors and those with mental health conditions to include a wider range of cognitive, behavioural and communication issues, and signs of these conditions rather than just formal diagnoses. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 also extended its definition of domestic abuse to include coercive control and emotional, psychological, and economic abuse. Furthermore, the ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’ programme (HM Government, 2023) emphasised how a child’s vulnerability can emerge not just through interactions with social care systems but in connection to many factors, such as, for example, extremism and extra-familial harm. Elsewhere, Section 2(2) of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 expanded the types of groups towards which authorities hold a special safeguarding duty, comprising, amongst others, domestic abuse victims, former armed forces members and people released from prison or youth detention centres.

These examples imply not only a growth in the number of people recognised by the state to be vulnerable but also the increasing requirement for practitioners to exercise discretion. This is arguable on the basis that broad definitions of the concept leave vulnerability-centred policy

more open to interpretation, encouraging practitioners themselves to interpret through their own judgements the parameters of vulnerability (Brown, 2014). The 2022 update of the 2014 Care Act's statutory guidance illustrates this, explicitly calling for practitioners to use discretion in their assessments of vulnerability.

On one hand, discretionary approaches to determining and managing vulnerability may serve to legitimise welfare provision in cases where otherwise, had strict criteria been followed, it might have not been awarded. As Brown (2015: 47) observes, such approaches can create 'safety nets for those who may otherwise fall through the cracks'. On the other hand, discretion-based practices are shaped by the personal (and potentially harmful) 'preferences, values, commitments and preoccupations of those who administer them in practice' (Brown, 2024: 295). These can materialise in discriminatory ways such that vulnerability can act as 'a locus for possible bias' (Gilson, 2024: 269).

Scholars have suggested that interventions based on vulnerability are often informed by practitioners' individualised ideas of morality and views as to who they deem a deserving recipient of support (Brown, 2015; 2024; Menichelli, 2019). Hence, vulnerability can be used 'as a kind of sociological shorthand or designation for worthiness' (Brown et al., 2017: 499). Nils Christie's (1986) concept of the 'ideal victim' resonates here. The 'ideal victim' is a blameless, passive and moral figure who epitomises 'innocence, purity, lack of responsibility, absence of guilt and moral superiority' (Bouris, 2007: 35). Christie (1986: 18) suggests that by virtue of these traits, this figure is '– when hit by crime – most readily' awarded 'the complete and legitimate status of being a victim'. To fulfil the criteria of the 'ideal victim' status, one must conform to social norms and any hardship they encounter must be deemed as having occurred through no fault of their own. Those who meet these requirements are more readily accepted as vulnerable and provided with support (Brown, 2014; Schwöbel-Patel, 2018). Scholars suggest that mobilising vulnerability in this way both 'institutionalises… "ideal victimhood"' (Brown, 2024: 288) and creates a 'hierarchy of victimisation' (Carrabine et al., 2004: 117, cited in Walklate, 2011: 183). This reiterates vulnerability's capacity to promote conditional welfare models, under which only those who meet accepted definitions of vulnerability are deemed worthy of, and therefore entitled to, help from the state (2.2.1.).

The inverse of the 'ideal victim' is the 'ideal offender'. According to Christie (1986: 25), the conceptualisation of the former requires and creates the conceptualisation of latter; they are 'interdependent' so '[t]he more ideal a victim is, the more ideal becomes the offender', and vice versa. Typically, the 'ideal offender' is a male, strong, independent and reckless figure (Christie, 1986; Walklate, 2007; Schwöbel-Patel, 2018). This profile is often ascribed to young, lower-class, black men whose vulnerability has historically often been overwritten by

prevailing notions of deviance and threat (Long, 2018). Here, neoliberal principles and ideas of the 'underclass' are apparent, along with an illustration of how conceptual alignments between risk and vulnerability can materialise in practice. The implications of vulnerability-centred policy that invokes notions of risk are explored next in Section 2.2.4.

Practitioners' measures of social conformity and vulnerability encompass assessments of both people's attributes and behaviours. Brown's (2014: 380) research revealed how young people were more likely to be seen as vulnerable if they shared personal details and expressed remorse, a willingness to engage and 'motivation for change'. This was reiterated in her later research (2017: 180) which showed how 'amenability, acquiescence and responsiveness all seemed central to the achievement of vulnerability status'. Brown (2014: 373) also observed how 'dangerous wrong-doers' who failed to present sufficient compliance were more likely to fall outside of categorisations based on measures of vulnerability. Hence, assessments of vulnerability can become sites for prejudice that reinforce social inequalities (Walklate, 2011; Gilson, 2024).

Research has indicated that recognitions of vulnerability are informed not only by suffering and exposure to harm but also by presenting that suffering and exposure in acceptable ways (O'Connell Davidson, 2011; Oliviero, 2018; Aliverti, 2020). This requires individuals to prove their vulnerability, essentially compelling them to 'perform poverty' (Peel, 2003: 74, cited in Mitchell, 2020: 232). People may therefore make strategic attempts to disclose information they believe would give them the best chances of meeting the thresholds for care (Brown, 2014). Presentations of vulnerability thus become tailored to fit the 'cultural scripts' of suffering as defined and recognised by practitioners (Mitchell, 2020: 234). This connects to Butler's (2004) concept of 'norms of recognition' which identifies how certain forms of suffering are more acknowledged and acknowledgeable than others. This approach risks welfare provision being determined on one's ability to 'perform', rather than their degree of need.

Mobilisations of vulnerability can therefore create a hierarchy based on social respectability and morality, essentially deploying it as a proxy for worthiness. Brown (2017: 180–181) suggests that this sets up a 'double suffering' for those who both experience adversity and do not receive help because they fail to comply with accepted ideas of vulnerability. The result is a fragmentation and stratification of vulnerability: whether and how vulnerable people are acknowledged 'depends on how [their] bodies, identities, and social positions are interpreted' (Gilson, 2021: 95). The likelihood that such perceptions and hierarchies may be shaped by prevailing political agendas and public concerns is a pertinent point in the context of policing. As the police are public servants whose work is designed to be informed by the concerns of

the public, there is much scope for prevailing social norms and ideals to inform their priorities (2.3.).

While practitioner discretion may facilitate more context-sensitive, tailored approaches to assessing vulnerability, it also introduces inconsistency and bias. Policy responses to vulnerable people can be informed by the endorsement and defence of social norms, rewarding those seen to conform to them and excluding those who were deemed not to adequately 'perform' vulnerability. Social policy practice can therefore operate to both allow vulnerable individuals to fall through the cracks and reproduce the cracks within the very systems meant to protect such people.

2.2.4. The use of vulnerability as a mechanism to control 'risky' groups

The previous section explored how the processes by which certain people may be excluded from recognitions of vulnerability can compound harm and marginalisation. Harm can also be brought about where recognitions of vulnerability *are* made. Vulnerability's cognate concepts, as explored in Section 2.1.1., are pertinent here. In social policy as well as in theory, vulnerability, risk and resilience are often aligned. This framing has been criticised for strengthening perceptions of weakness and deficiency among the people they target (Munro and Scoular, 2012; Munro, 2017; Aliverti, 2020). Particularly within disability and gerontology studies it is argued that such approaches to vulnerability result in disempowering and paternalistic processes (Wishart, 2003; Hasler, 2004; Hollomotz, 2012). Relatedly, Fawcett (2009: 481) raises concerns over the scope for practitioners to reduce the lives of vulnerable people to a matter of risk factors with an excessive focus on their 'functional incapacity'.

Entanglements of risk and vulnerability in social policy can prompt framings of the latter as a problem to be removed or at least curbed (Gilson, 2014: 73; ten Have, 2015: 403; Brown, 2024: 288). Hence, vulnerability-centred policy can push a problematic conception whereby vulnerable people are depicted as presenting a risk, essentially situating them within a 'vulnerability–transgression nexus' (Brown, 2015: 85; Moon, 2000). As Brown et al. (2017: 500, emphasis in original) state, 'ideas about vulnerability (especially when deployed in policy) can be controversial due to how these can mix concerns about *risk to* certain groups with anxieties about *risks from* these groups'. On this reading, McLaughlin (2012: 112) notes how vulnerability-centred policy can impose 'vulnerable identities' upon certain people under a 'politics of fear'. This perpetuates a 'them and us' narrative encouraging vulnerable people to be outcast from 'mainstream' society (Brown, 2015: 60; Squires, 2006: 152–153).

Moreover, such constructions of vulnerability can serve as a means of targeting those deemed 'in need of behaviourist interventions' (Mitchell, 2020: 226) and legitimising the 'intensification of state control' against them (Brown et al., 2017: 500). Section 2.3. explores these ideas in the context of policing.

Framings of vulnerability through lenses of social risk also serve to create political space for the state to justify withdrawing from addressing the structural forces that contribute to producing conditions of vulnerability. As Mitchell (2020: 227) argues, the 'vulnerability discourse works in tandem with "risk" and "resilience" to individualise social problems and distract from the social conditions that (re)produce disadvantage and marginalisation'. Similarly, Koch (2015: 141) observes how policy can fail to account for 'the structural and social processes and institutions that originally created and sustained th[e] very vulnerability' it claims to address. When this occurs, the state's obligation to remedy the harms generated by its own systems risks being minimised or overlooked (Hannah-Moffat, 2005; Paasche et al., 2018).

Such dynamics relate closely to ideas of the 'underclass' (2.2.1.). Where vulnerability may be constructed as a person's own problem to eradicate or at least manage, the concept can be mobilised under a moral enterprise to 'responsibilise' individuals and justify the selective withdrawal of welfare provision (Munro and Scoular, 2012; Robinson 2023). Tyler's (2013b) investigation into immigration governance illustrates this, revealing how classist and racist abjections of certain subjects were used to justify harsher welfare regimes and the retrenchment of state provisions.

In sum, vulnerability in policy can be constructed and deployed in ways that reinforce the very problems it purports to address. Thus, state responses to matters of vulnerability may even be counterproductive to the safeguarding of vulnerable people. According to Brown (2024: 289), certain interventions can comprise 'intensifying forms of governance which regulate marginalised… populations', delivered 'through increasingly interwoven welfare and penal mechanisms within a wider context of welfare support erosion'. Of particular concern here is how such interventions are often delivered under the guise of protection, or what Van Loon (2008: 59) calls a 'cloak of concern'. This guise conceals, or at least obscures, the targeting, controlling and marginalisation of certain people through declarations of care and support (Bartkowiak-Théron and Asquith, 2012; Brown, 2017; Gilson, 2021).

2.2.5. Section summary

Vulnerability can play a multifaceted and precarious role in social policy, not least in how it shapes recognised boundaries between care and control, and inclusion and exclusion. This section explored how mobilisations of the concept can represent a 'dovetailing' of agendas (Aliverti, 2020: 1127); while they may ostensibly promise support and protection, they can also be invoked in ways that compound harm and suffering. Hence, vulnerability can create 'negative and positive or even unclear' effects, depending on how it is deployed, who is deploying it and the context in which it is deployed (Gilson, 2024: 264). The extensive practical, political and ethical stakes within mobilisations of vulnerability underscore the importance of researching its application and implications in practice.

The dynamics and tensions that span across ideas and uses of vulnerability in social policy find parallels in the policing context. Policing has long played a prominent role in the state's response to vulnerable people and the intensity and type of intervention to which they may be subject. The next section explores relevance of and relationship between vulnerability and the aims and practices of policing.

2.3. Vulnerability in policing

The recent proliferation of vulnerability-centred discourse across academia and social policy is mirrored in the policing context (Keay and Kirby, 2018). Loader (2020: 13) identifies how the enhanced focus on vulnerability is situated within a 'lexicon' that has been 'brought to the fore' after being 'at best on the margins of policing only a decade ago'. The novelty of this new 'lexicon' is not the concept of vulnerability itself, which has always been relevant to policing (albeit often in a more implicit way than is the case today), but rather the specific language and operationalisation of it in contemporary policing (Aliverti, 2020; Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021). Hence, the current focus on vulnerability marks both a continuation and reconfiguration of policing traditions.

The following discussion of vulnerability in policing is organised into two main parts. The first examines vulnerability as a traditional policing focus. The second considers the recent emergence of vulnerability as an operational lens and its implications for the police.

2.3.1. Vulnerability as a traditional focus in policing

It is widely recognised (in academia at least) that police work is, for the most part, concerned with upholding social order (Loader, 2020; Newburn, 2022).[8] As Schwartz and Miller (1964: 161, cited in Mawby, 1990: 2-3) contend, the police can be defined as a 'specialised armed force used partially or wholly for norm enforcement'. The enforcement of said 'norm', according to Bayley (1994: 34), involves officers attending and 'sort[ing] out' situations in which something has gone awry, or, as Reiner (2010: 141) puts it, 'calming a sea of social troubles'. This distinctly broad remit is captured in Bittner's (1990: 249) revered description of the police function, which he defines as 'stop[ping] something-that-ought-not-to-behappening-and-about-which-somebody-ought-to-do-something-now!'.

The police deal with a wide array of human and societal problems, including matters of welfare and safeguarding (Charman, 2017; Crawford, 2024). Indeed, their role has always involved promoting public safety, managing risk and providing 'general assistance' to those in need (Bayley, 1994: 33; Emsley, 1997; 2009). For Punch (1979), recognising that much of what the police do involves responding to social need prompted him to label them the 'secret social service'. In the same vein, officers have been described elsewhere as guardians (Rehr and Rice, 2015), public servants (Caveney et al., 2020), social peacekeepers (Kyprianides and Bradford, 2024), guides and friends (Cumming et al., 1965).

The functions relating to order maintenance, welfare work and responding to social need provide a partial explanation for the longstanding relevance of vulnerability in policing. As Sections 2.1. and 2.2. established, vulnerability is often interpreted as a condition of exceptionality – in terms of levels of risk, exposure to harm, ability to cope with adversity, etc. – which can be taken as a signal of need and in turn invoked to justify intervention. If the police mission is understood as maintaining social order, it makes sense that their attention and activity are routinely focused upon points perceived as signalling or at least implying the presence of risk, need and, relatedly, vulnerability (Bartkowiak-Theron and Crehan, 2010; Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021).

On the surface, police interactions with vulnerable people ostensibly stem from logical and legitimate directives concerned with assisting and protecting those in need. While this can be the case in part, the processes through which officers perceive, identify and respond to vulnerable people are much less straightforward in practice. Indeed, policing is shaped

[8] Since the mid-20th century, academics have identified the maintenance of social order as the core function of policing (Banton, 1964; Punch, 1979; Holdaway, 1983; Bittner, 1980). Beyond academia, public, political and institutional framings have tended to define the police mandate more narrowly through crime-fighting objectives, despite such framings misrepresenting the greater part of what the police do (Bayley, 1994; Reiner, 2010). Chapter Three (3.1.1.) revisits this subject.

considerably by the dynamic and complex interplay of institutional pressures, cultural norms, discretionary practices and personal judgements (Skolnick, 1966; Reiner, 2010; Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021). The next two subsections investigate two key forces within this interplay: patterns of social marginalisation and occupational police culture. It is worth noting that these subjects closely interact and coalesce in ways that have long shaped the form and intensity of policing to which vulnerable people have traditionally been subject.

2.3.1.1. Framing approaches to policing vulnerable groups as a reflection and reproduction of social marginalisation

With the maintenance of social order being foundational to the police mandate, policing has always called upon officers to define what order – and the threat to it – looks like in different contexts (Loftus, 2010). As Alpert et al. (2005: 415) suggest, officers are required to 'look at a scene and determine what looks correct and what "doesn't fit"'. By identifying whatever or, as is often the case, *whomever* is 'out of order', officers can direct their attention accordingly and work towards restoring a sense of 'order' as they understand it (Ericson, 1982: 137). The result is that the people perceived or suspected of threatening social order become the most likely subjects of 'the hard end of police power' (Reiner, 2010: 33; Loftus, 2010). In this way, policing delivers practical and symbolic functions, involving the enforcement of not only the law but also society's moral boundaries, concerning them with producing an image of social order, or 'good', and removing what is publicly perceived as disorderly, or 'evil' (Matza, 1969: 197; Henry, 2021: 1070).

Popular conceptualisations of vulnerability among policy and public discourse are relevant here. Section 2.2. identified how framings of vulnerability through notions of risk, difference and disadvantage can contribute to the idea and treatment of certain vulnerable people as risks and problems to be managed and controlled, rather than people in need of support. Since it is often the behaviours, lifestyles or identities of marginalised groups that are perceived as deviating from social standards of respectability, it is traditionally upon such groups that policing – actuated by a duty to regulate established social order -'bears down heaviest' (Reiner, 2010: 33). For Henry (2021: 1075), it is something of 'a given' that policing is largely directed towards those who are '(relatively speaking) outsiders'. Similarly, Chakraborti and Garland (2012: 506) recognise how the police target 'those who are impoverished, disenfranchised or subject to discrimination, intolerance, subordination and stigma… on the basis of their apparent vulnerability or obvious markers of "difference"'. This reveals how, by generally mirroring 'the distribution of esteem, credit and desserts in society at large', policing

can reflect and reinforce dominant social structures pertaining to marginalisation (Bittner, 1970: 11).

The targeting of vulnerable groups is a pattern rooted in and reflective of the very origins of the modern police (Jones, 1982; Emsley, 2009). Reiner (2010: 64) suggests that from the first early nineteenth century operations of the Metropolitan Police, lower-class citizens were situated 'at the sharp end of policing activities'. A growing consensus in the 1800s framed this population, dubbed the 'criminal class' as responsible for most crime and a direct 'threat to the social order' (Bland, 2022: 16). The consensus followed that those of lower classes had 'escaped' from virtually all forms of social control, necessitating that the police impose 'a constant, unceasing pressure of surveillance upon all facets of life in working-class communities' (Storch, 1975: 64; 1976; Jones, 1982; Lawrence, 2004). Engels (1962: 263, cited in Storch, 1975: 61) captures well the traditional discriminatory nature of policing in his claim that 'the policeman's truncheon… has for [the English Bourgeois] a wonderfully soothing power. But for the workingman quite otherwise!'. This indicates how, since the outset, the social disadvantage of marginalised people has been interpreted and addressed as an individual failure that legitimises coercive intervention. While in the early 1800s the analogous term was the 'criminal class', the concept of the 'underclass' resonates here (2.2.1.), for spanning across both is the idea that a social subgroup poses a risk to society and should be monitored and controlled accordingly.

As well as 'the poor', Bittner (1980: 10) observes 'ethnic and racial minorities' among 'the preferred targets of special police concern'. Lea (2000: 230) suggests that such groups, particularly young black men, are heavily policed in accordance with 'stereotypes of dangerousness and disorderliness'. Others have identified similar framings of racial minority groups, especially young black men, as 'predisposed to criminality' (Long, 2018: 7), a 'criminalised sub-population' (Britton, 2000: 702) and an 'ideal-type of law-breaker' whose presence denotes threat and therefore justifies intensive policing (Ivanich and Warner, 2019: 81; Christie, 1986; Long, 2018). Such claims are bolstered by persistent racial disparities in the police use of stop and search powers (Murray et al., 2020), force (Angiolini, 2017) and arrest (Home Office, 2024a).

Individuals experiencing homelessness, who already exist within an overarching landscape of 'structural disempowerment', are also traditionally subject to intensified policing (Kyprianides et al., 2021: 679; Kyprianides and Bradford, 2024). Societal stigmatisation of homelessness in general and perceptions of homeless people as 'a political and social annoyance that needs to be hidden' serve to legitimise the police targeting this group, controlling their behaviours and excluding them from public spaces (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021: 59; Moore, 2008;

Ivanich and Warner, 2019). Moreover, as such people tend to be 'unsheltered (on the street)', they are often highly visible within public areas that the police are tasked with regulating (Ivanich and Warner, 2019: 834). As Cooper (2016: 29) states, 'homelessness produces targets for policing, and by extension, punishment'. Hence, broad structural inequalities influence not only how certain vulnerable people exist within public places but also how their presence is interpreted and controlled through policing (Brown et al., 2024). This point is especially pertinent for neighbourhood policing models which emphasise proactive patrol and community engagement (Chapter Three), thus revealing much scope for interactions between neighbourhood officers and those in public spaces. As Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron (2021: 87) observe, '[i]f a population is more visible, then they are more likely to be a target for all police encounters, including community policing'.

Bittner (1980: 10) further identifies 'young people in general' as conventional targets of 'special police concern'. Scholars identify how this group has historically been cast as 'troublesome' (Crawford, 2008: 753), 'undesirable' (Brown, 2013: 539), and 'the root cause of problem[s]' (Hodgkinson and Tilley, 2011: 290). Crawford (2009) suggests that longstanding conflations of youth with risk and undesirability have blurred distinctions between crime and low-level antisocial behaviour, allowing the police to justify the targeting, control and further social exclusion of young people. Indeed, research has widely proposed that the policing of young people is often concerned less with managing genuine issues and more with creating the appearance of social order by 'keep[ing] young people away from certain open public spaces' (Woolley, 2006: 57) and 'reclaiming public space from undesirables' (Millie, 2008: 1682; Campbell, 2002; Squires, 2006).

This section illustrated how wider patterns of social marginalisation are mirrored in policing, with those 'at the bottom of the social strata' routinely situated as primary foci of police attention (Loftus, 2010: 12). It explored how certain vulnerable groups have traditionally been addressed as problems of individual misconduct and risk, rather than in terms of structural disadvantage. Consistent with its order maintenance mission, policing has tended to bear down especially on those who inhabit public spaces, where their visibility – and the visibility of their 'non-conforming' lifestyles – makes them more accessible and exposed to intervention.

While policing is shaped by broad social structures and norms that project *inwards* (as explored above), it is also, in a simultaneous and compounding way, influenced by 'the pattern of situations that [the police] *institutionally prioritise'* (Henry, 2021: 1070, emphasis added). The next section explores how the internal dimensions of police culture project *outwards* to shape the policing of vulnerable groups.

2.3.1.2. Occupational police culture and policing vulnerable groups

Campeau and Keesman (2024: 3) describe police culture as 'a comprehensive term encompassing a wide range of cultural categories, all relating to the complex system of values and attitudes that define the normative social world of police'.[9] Essentially, police culture operates as a framework through which officers interpret and navigate their role within their occupational environment (Holdaway, 1983; Reiner, 2010). This framework is underpinned by and reinforced through the distinct nature, demands and conditions of policing which culminate to provide officers with a unique worldview or, as Skolnick (1966) terms it, a distinct 'working personality'.

This 'working personality' both informs and is informed by officers' observations and experiences (Skolnick, 1966). Police work routinely exposes officers to the 'darker side of society' (Campeau and Keesman, 2024: 9). This exposure has significant psychological effects. For Banton (1964: 144), officers, in their 'unparalleled position to observe the machinery of society in operation', can become 'critic[s] of society', hardened by their repeat witnessing of disorder and adversity. Similarly, Westley (1970: 49) posits that consistently observing the public 'in their evil, their sorrow, and their degradation and defeat' teaches officers to see citizens 'as a threat'.

Reiner (2010: 120) suggests that officers develop 'a hard skin of bitterness' and a sense of scepticism and mistrust towards the public (Manning, 1977; Loftus, 2009). This perception denotes the familiar 'us versus them' mentality: bolstered through their shared experiences, officers build a sense of solidarity with one another while harbouring suspicion towards and a detachment from wider society (Skolnick, 1966; Loftus, 2010). Importantly though, the police do not view the public as one entity. Rather, officers distinguish 'between types of "them"' through their judgements about different people's 'power to cause problems, and their congruency to the police value system' (Reiner, 2010: 122-123). At a broad level, individuals are categorised as either 'a good citizen or a suspect' (Matza, 1969: 191) or 'those deemed to be deserving of police help and the "others"' (McLaughlin, 2007: 55). In finer detail, people are sorted under specific moral and behavioural types, such as 'good-class citizens', 'suspicious individuals', 'assholes', 'villains', 'troublemakers' and 'rubbish' (Skolnick, 1966; van Maanen, 1978; Reiner, 2010). Among those traditionally classified and treated as the 'other' are vulnerable groups at the social margins (Loftus, 2010). For Reiner (2010: 123),

[9] Though often discussed in a generalised way, occupational police culture is not monolithic or homogenous but rather dynamic in nature and subject to variation between different contexts and officers' lived experiences (Chan, 1996; Reiner, 2010; 2016). Despite this potential for change, in practice the core traits of police culture have remained consistent over time and space (Loftus, 2009). Accordingly, this discussion addresses police culture as an established and substantiated phenomenon while nonetheless accepting that it can differ between contexts.

such groups constitute ‘police property’, a term invoked to describe the ‘low-status, powerless groups who the dominant majority see as problematic or distasteful’.

Since the police officer’s ‘working personality’ emerges through experience, repeat encounters with certain people create opportunities for police biases and suspicions toward such people to develop (Skolnick, 1966; Manning, 1977; Ericson, 1982). As Alpert et al. (2005: 414) found, officers who consistently stop and arrest black men can come to profile such individuals as ‘likely to be criminally suspect’. This also reinforces why police suspicion can be projected acutely towards those in public spaces whose visible presence creates ongoing opportunities for police interactions (Ivanich and Warner, 2019; Brown et al., 2024).

As a core component of police culture, suspicion emerges not only as a by-product of officers’ repeat exposures but also as a coping mechanism to help them manage the unpredictability and potential danger inherent to their work (Skolnick, 1966; Bittner, 1980). As Rubenstein (1973: 215) notes, ‘[b]ecause he [the police officer] cannot know a great deal of what is going on…, he is frequently obliged to rely on suspicion to guide him into action’. It is through their suspicion that officers build ‘finely grained cognitive maps of the social world’ (Reiner, 1992a: 115). For Waddington (1999: 101) these ‘maps’, or ‘perceptual lenses’ as he terms them, teach officers how to become ‘selectively attuned to incongruities that would escape the rest of us but might be indicative of something amiss’. These processes tie closely to the order maintenance role discussed earlier; to uphold order, officers must recognise ‘when background expectancies are in variance’ and, in doing so, draw upon their suspicion (Loftus, 2010: 14). As their ability to notice deviations from the norm is cultivated in part through their occupational experience, Wilson (1968: 283) proposes that an officer is ‘neither a bureaucrat nor a professional, but a member of a craft’ whose ‘craft’ is learned and refined ‘on the job’.

Officers build and use these ‘cognitive maps’ to make rapid, often pre-emptive, judgements to help them manage the constant pressure they are under to ‘get results’ (Reiner, 2010: 119; Skolnick, 1966: 42). As Rubenstein (1973: 263) describes, ‘[t]he policeman… assimilates his experience, files away advice given and tested, accumulates information about people and places, and develops cues that suggest that one person in this place or another person elsewhere is a “good stop”’. In short, officers operationalise their accrued ‘practical street wisdom’ as a means of policing efficiently and effectively (Lea, 2000: 230; Holdaway, 1983). Thacher (2019: 280) recognises how often police judgements are ‘irreducibly improvisational’ in nature, made ‘in situ’ rather than in accordance with ‘objective scripts that can be specified ex ante’. This reiterates the sense of policing as a craft (Wilson, 1968).

Because officers’ judgements are informed by performance-orientated considerations, Ericson (1982: 8) theorises that a young person in a ‘shagwagon’ would more likely attract police

attention than an elderly lady in her 'stationwagon' on the assumption that the former is more likely to be in possession of contraband. In the context of policing racial minorities, Cashmore (2001: 652) revealed how some white officers deemed racism to be 'a product of practical necessities… emerg[ing] from the attempt to ascertain how to do one's job effectively'. Participants in this study offered a so-called policing 'philosophy' which followed that stopping a cohort of black youths would be worthwhile on the assumption that 'at least one of them is going to be guilty of something' (Cashmore, 2001: 652). Such research illuminates the key role of police discretion, most prevalent among and 'of necessity [to] frontline police' whose working environment is typically characterised by unpredictability and the absence of proximal supervision when on patrol (Hough, 2021: 64). With officers authorised (within certain parameters) to decide when to intervene, how to intervene and the reasons for intervening, police discretion allows cultural norms, assumptions and biases to be translated into practice (Loftus, 2010; Reiner, 2010; Newburn, 2022).

The information officers accumulate can deepen their suspicion not only towards the individuals they repeatedly encounter but also more generally towards the groups to which those individuals belong (Smith and Gray, 1985; Loftus, 2010). Consequently, people can become 'prime suspect[s]', simply because they have or are associated with an identity classified by the police as suspicious (Wilson, 1968: 40). On this basis, as Bittner (1980: 10) suggests, 'police activity is as much directed to who a person is as to what he does'. What can follow is entire communities being subject to intensified police surveillance and intervention under ostensible risk management objectives (Cashmore, 2001; Ivanich and Warner, 2019). Such processes feed into a self-perpetuating feedback loop: people suspected of being 'problematic or distasteful', especially those most visible and accessible to the police, experience more police encounters, providing opportunity for police suspicion of these people to build, thus serving to justify closer surveillance and yet more interactions (Reiner, 2010: 123; Rubenstein, 1973; Loftus, 2009). Hence, police encounters can act as both symptoms and reinforcements of pre-existing biases.

This section explored how occupational policing cultures inform how vulnerable groups are policed. Officers' discretion provides them with the space to interpret and act in individualised ways, yet it operates under a longstanding rhetoric that implies certain people to be more risky, suspicious and requiring of control than others. In any case, it is arguable that the inherent unpredictability of police work, the organisational and public pressures to 'get results' and the repeat exposure to certain people and situations not only encourage officers to be biased in their work but actively require this of them (Newburn, 2022).

Taking Sections 2.3.1.1. and 2.3.1.2. together, routine policing practices can be understood as capable of sustaining patterns of social disadvantage, with certain vulnerable groups consistently exposed to 'the hard end of police power' (Reiner, 2010: 33). This 'power', which can involve the use of force and arrest and the intensified scrutiny and control of lifestyles and freedoms, means that policing can both reinforce existing vulnerabilities among marginalised people and create new ways for them to experience harm.

2.3.2. Vulnerability as a contemporary lens in policing

While vulnerability has long been relevant to policing, a novel, more explicit emphasis on the concept has emerged more recently (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021). This focus has encouraged a practical reconfiguration of how the police identify, interact with and respond to vulnerable people, promoting a more inclusive and welfare-orientated approach that seeks to prioritise the needs of vulnerable individuals (Menichelli, 2019; Aliverti, 2020). This section, divided into two parts, outlines how the contemporary focus on vulnerability is adapting policing approaches and its implications for the role and work of the police.

2.3.2.1. Deconstructing hierarchies of vulnerability and broadening the parameters of who qualifies as vulnerable

Section 2.2. explored how vulnerability is often mobilised under hierarchical structures related to notions of conformity and deservedness. It noted how whether individuals are deemed worthy of the support can depend on whether they are perceived as demonstrating sufficient need and showing that their circumstances are beyond their control (Gilson, 2021: 95). The result is a stratification of vulnerability: those whose struggles and needs meet established criteria qualify for support, while those who fail to meet these thresholds – regardless of their genuine hardship or vulnerability – may be excluded from recognition (Brown, 2015).

Christie's 'ideal victim' and 'ideal offender' concepts resonate here (2.2.3.). Victims of crime whose conditions and needs are deemed to align with established narratives of innocence and deservingness have been most readily accepted as vulnerable (Walklate, 2011; Toman, 2019). Conversely, suspects and offenders, especially those from marginalised groups, are less often regarded as vulnerable when their behaviours are interpreted as acts of free-will that signal culpability and warrant condemnation (Long, 2018). Hence, hierarchies of vulnerability position offenders as 'the least likely to be considered vulnerable' (Walklate, 2011: 183).

Contemporary approaches to vulnerability seek to challenge these boundaries by mobilising the concept as a more fluid and inclusive category, recognising how vulnerability, risk and need emerge across an increasing array of contexts (Chakraborti and Garland, 2012; Fineman, 2019; Aliverti, 2020). This widened framing is indicated in the COP's (2021) definition of vulnerable individuals, described broadly as those who, 'as a result of their situation or circumstances… are unable to take care of or protect themselves or others from harm or exploitation'. Menichelli (2019: 699) similarly argues that 'adopting a perspective centred on vulnerability should lead to policies that are developed to meet the needs of vulnerable people – whoever they may be'. Under this perspective therefore, vulnerability is not perceived through a conditional lens dependent upon ideas of morality and individual culpability but instead as a product of circumstances relating to risk, adversity, etc. which can affect anyone (Brown, 2015). Dehaghani and Newman (2017: 1221) note how this approach 'recognis[es] common humanity and keep[s] an open mind to human frailty'. This reveals how principles of universal vulnerability theory resonate here (2.1.2.; 2.2.1.).

By expanding the parameters of vulnerability beyond the conventional boundaries of victims, this approach allows 'us to appreciate – and cement – the manner in which those suspected or accused of committing crimes against them can also be vulnerable' (Dehaghani and Newman, 2017: 1221; Brown et al., 2024). The vulnerability of offenders and suspects, Toman (2019: 350) suggests, is apparent in the way that 'victims and offenders, although not identical, share many of the same characteristics'. Prevalent shared risk factors and conditions of vulnerability among both groups, involving, for example, gang involvement (Decker et al., 2013; Pyrooz et al., 2014), mental health issues (Silver et al., 2011), adolescence (Smith and Ecob, 2007) and exposure to violence (Sampson and Lauritsen, 1990), reveal how victimhood and offending can overlap. Bucerius et al.'s (2021) study of incarcerated individuals reiterates this, finding that almost all participants had experienced serious adversity or victimisation prior to offending themselves and being imprisoned.

By highlighting the commonalities between victims and offenders, the vulnerability lens promotes an image of offenders as less of a risk to society and more as people who are at risk themselves. In essence, it blurs traditional distinctions drawn between the blameless victim and the culpable offender. As Loader (2020: 13) observes, focusing on vulnerability reconceptualises '"offending" by vulnerable individuals as the product of entrapment and exploitation'. Hence, through the language and recognition of social disadvantage, adversity and victimisation, 'problem' behaviour is interpreted as symptomatic of deeper social conditions and inequalities (Loader, 2020; Brown et al., 2024). By way of example, those who commit terror offences have been framed as vulnerable to radicalisation (Richards, 2011), and sex workers have been redefined as victims of exploitation and inequality rather than moral

deviants (Phoenix and Oerton, 2005; Carline, 2011). Similar narratives emerge in the contexts of offenders with mental health needs (Bradley, 2009) and young people who break the law (Morgan and Zedner, 1992; Brown, 2015).

Framing vulnerability as an outcome of broad social, environmental and economic forces (and offending as a symptom of these forces) reflects a public-health approach, steering attention away from individual responsibility and towards what Christmas and Srivastava (2019: 11) call 'the causes of the causes' that recognise how 'the circumstances of your life have a cumulative impact on your life chances'. Through this lens, vulnerability acts as an explanatory and moral frame, contextualising behaviours in ways that destabilise the traditional segregation between innocence and culpability and promote support-orientated responses, rather than condemnation.

2.3.2.2. Implications of the focus on vulnerability for the role and work of the police

The recent focus on vulnerability has formalised the identification and mitigation of risk as priorities within the strategies and everyday decision-making of policing. For instance, the National Vulnerability Action Plan (VKPP, 2023: 26) notes officers' responsibility to 'identify risk at an early stage and provide the opportunity for protection'. Similarly, the COP's (2021) guidelines entitled 'Recognising and responding to vulnerability-related risk' impose upon officers a duty to 'spot the clues associated with vulnerability-related risk' and 'be curious and obtain a rich picture of circumstances associated with an incident'. More generally, the 'Policing Vision 2025' stipulates a main police priority to be 'protecting the vulnerable' (NPCC, 2016: 4). Higgins (2018a: 11) suggests that this focus has reorientated police attention away from responding to crime and towards measuring, anticipating and combatting the 'harmfulness' of it and its impact on vulnerable people. He (2018a: 51) identifies this development to have situated 'vulnerable/high-risk/high-demand individuals' as 'the subjects' of police priorities.

The focus on vulnerability emphasises the need for multi-agency working on the recognition that complex cases require complex and coordinated solutions. The causes, conditions and implications of vulnerability span diverse (and often intersecting) domains, such as mental and physical health, poverty, race and environment (2.1.). The police alone cannot respond effectively to the full range and complications of issues associated with vulnerability, not least because officers generally lack the specialist training and resources required to do so (NPIA, 2012; Keay and Kirby, 2018).

Effective safeguarding of vulnerable people requires actors across an array of policy fields to address issues of vulnerability 'in concertation with each other' (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021: 53; Christmas and Srivastava, 2019). According to Loader (2020: 13), 'the need for new skills, capacities [and] partnerships… as a precondition for addressing the changing landscape of harm effectively'. This approach is embedded in professional guidance, with the COP (2021) directing officers to 'involv[e] partners where they have the relevant skills and resources' and the National Vulnerability and Public Protection Strategy (VKPP, 2025: 8) supporting the police 'work[ing] with others, to look at the causes of problems'. Within this landscape, multi-agency casework has increasingly become 'the mechanism for response' to vulnerability (Higgins, 2018a: 51).

Despite the emphasis on multi-agency approaches, the retrenchment and fragmentation of other public services have at times stunted the embedding of partnership working. Reductions in the welfare state's capabilities and provisions, particularly those resulting from the years of austerity last decade, have caused much of the vulnerability-related work that has traditionally been the business of social service bodies to be transferred to criminal justice agencies, especially the police (Cummins, 2013; 2018). Further research substantiates that reductions in the resourcing and availability of wider public services, especially those pertaining to mental health matters, have increased the demand on the police to deal with such issues (Cummins and Edmondson, 2016; Leese and Russell, 2017; Solar and Smith, 2022).

Crawford (2024: 432) identifies how the growing expectation on the police to deal with matters of vulnerability has prompted a surge in framings of social problems – ranging from mental health issues to neighbourhood nuisances, and from healthcare and welfare activities to public safety matters – as 'police problems'. While addressing social need and responding to vulnerable people have long been key dimensions of police work (2.3.1.), Cordner (2014: 199) suggests that '[g]iven gaps in available services to vulnerable populations, police officers have become de facto service providers'. Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron (2021: 6) reiterate how the police are increasingly being situated 'at the front end of government responses to issues that were never intended to be within their remit in the first place'.

This mandate expansion has prompted questions as to the logics, capacities and appropriateness of police involvement in responses to matters of vulnerability. As Buscariolli (2025: 54) remarks, the increasing expectation for the police to 'manage chronic social problems' calls into question the police's 'moral mandate' and the ethical and practical implications of situating vulnerability at the centre of policing. Similarly, Loader (2020: 13) observes how 'it is sometimes rather difficult… to discern exactly why the police are involved and where the proper limits of their role are supposed to lie'. These concerns are brought to

the fore when officers intervene in situations involving dimensions of vulnerability but lack the specialist training, knowledge or resources to respond effectively, risking potentially making a situation worse through their intervention (Bartkowiak-Théron and Layton, 2012: 55; Longstaff et al., 2015: 41). In line with these concerns, efforts have been made to moderate the police involvement with matters of vulnerability through, for instance, the 'Right Care, Right Person' approach.[10]

This section illustrated how the contemporary emphasis on vulnerability seeks to reorientate the policing mandate itself by widening the parameters through which vulnerability is recognised, encouraging a move away from punitive traditions and towards more caring and welfare-orientated approaches. It is arguable that this current focus represents both an intentional strategy and a by-product of broader social developments; as policing fills in the gaps left by the retrenchment of other public services, the police are increasingly drawn into the policy domains of welfare, health care, social care and so on. This development is not without its tensions and challenges, specifically in terms of the appropriateness, limits and implications of the involvement of policing in matters of vulnerability.

2.3.3. Section summary

While vulnerability, risk and need have consistently been central to guiding police practice, the recent emphasis on vulnerability indicates a shift in how these conditions are framed and the responses they might elicit. Traditionally, as shaped by broader social structures and occupational police culture, certain vulnerable groups have been further 'marginalised *through* the institution of policing' (Loftus, 2010: 17, emphasis added). The contemporary framing of vulnerability presents opportunities for more support-orientated approaches (Brown, 2024).

Whether the opportunities implied under this reframing can be realised is complicated in part by the persistence of entrenched occupational cultures that make reforms in policing challenging (Loftus, 2009; Campeau and Keesman, 2024). As Skogan (2008: 23) observes, 'police reform is risky and hard, and efforts to innovate in policing often fall short of expectations'. Efforts to overcome policing's resistance to change, Fielding (1988: 205)

[10] The Right Care, Right Person (RCRP) approach establishes a framework to help the police make decisions about their involvement in responses to incidents involving individuals experiencing mental health needs. Its broad purpose is to 'reduce inappropriate police involvement in care and support better access to mental health specialists'. Many forces have begun to implement the RCRP approach. Information available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-partnershipagreement-right-care-right-person/national-partnership-agreement-right-care-right-person-rcrp (accessed 12/03/26).

suggests, must 'enlist the support of the ordinary constables who conduct the reality of policing we experience'. In this way, mobilising vulnerability as a progressive concept that facilitates more inclusive, considered and long-term responses to vulnerable people requires officers to support the cultural transformation within policing that such reform demands. Moreover, Reiner (2016: 240) states how progress through police reform is made possible only by 'tackling the foundational injustices and inequalities in the societies being policed'. Therefore, achieving meaningful change depends on both institutional change and an overarching societal commitment to confronting and addressing the structural forces contributing to vulnerability.

Enang et al. (2022: 541) argue that '[r]egardless of where the emphasis is at any point in time regarding which "core" functions the police should focus on, it is likely that they will frequently come across and need to assess people with vulnerabilities'. In the continually evolving realm of vulnerability in policing, ongoing research is needed to examine how understandings and applications of vulnerability are shaping police practices and the implications of these processes, especially for the vulnerable groups with whom the police so regularly interact.

2.4. Conclusion

This chapter examined vulnerability across its theoretical, social policy and policing contexts. Exploring key debates across these realms has revealed the concept's extensive and complex political, ethical and practical capacities and tensions.

Despite often being framed as one, vulnerability need not be a negative term. Increasingly, there is debate about whether there is conceptual space to create an 'emboldened account of vulnerability' that captures human interconnectedness, strengthens resilience, exposes social inequalities and creates a platform upon which justice can be pursued (Robinson, 2023: 3; Baiasu, 2020; Gilson, 2024). Nonetheless, popular framings and mobilisations of vulnerability across many contexts continue to risk being 'potentially damaging to the pursuit of social justice' (Brown, 2011: 314). For as long as vulnerability – and vulnerable people – are framed as a problem that requires controlling and correcting, the concept's scope to compound the issues it purports to address will surely persist.

The unsettled debates as to the meaning, constitution and use of vulnerability indicate the importance of continued examinations into constructions of vulnerability and their implications, especially for vulnerable people and the intended subjects of vulnerability-

centred policy and policing. It also critical to resist treating vulnerability as a stable identity that one either has or is and instead see it as a contextually situated and contingent condition (Fawcett, 2009; Luna, 2009). This points attention towards the ways that wider social forces reproduce vulnerability and how 'resilience is provided or removed by institutions', rather than laying fault with the individuals disadvantaged by such structures (Dehaghani, 2021: 256).

Chapter Three: Tracing the emergence and evolution of neighbourhood policing

This chapter charts the recent development of neighbourhood policing in England and Wales. It sets out the various social, political and cultural conditions which have shaped the trajectory of neighbourhood policing and demonstrates how its meaning, objectives and practices have evolved over time. By delivering a contextualised outline and understanding of neighbourhood policing, the chapter seeks to provide the necessary grounding upon which to empirically investigate the implementation of the current model through a vulnerability lens.

Organised into five main sections, the chapter takes a broadly chronological approach to the recent development of neighbourhood policing. As neighbourhood policing constitutes the latest iteration of community policing (Savage 2007a; 2007b), discussion begins by introducing community policing as a foundational tradition of British policing. The second section sets out the mid- to late-20th century context that preceded the early 21st century official launch of neighbourhood policing. Here, the social and political currents in operation across these decades and their implications for policing reform are outlined. Thirdly, the original establishment of neighbourhood policing under the early models rolled out by the formative programmes of the New Labour governments are detailed. The penultimate section explores the erosion of neighbourhood policing during the years of austerity that followed the 2010 General Election and Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. Finally, the contemporary landscape of neighbourhood policing is presented through an overview of the model envisioned by the current Labour government.

In its effort to provide a contextualised account of neighbourhood policing, this chapter covers a relatively large period of history. It should be noted, however, that the chapter enlists a selective approach, drawing upon and exploring only the most relevant and influential developments and topics to keep discussion focused.

3.1. Community policing as a bedrock of British policing traditions

The task of defining community policing is made challenging by its 'slippery' (Tilley, 2008: 101), 'plastic' (Eck and Rosenbaum, 1994: 3) and 'nebulous' (Rowe et al., 2024: 101) character. Academics have described community policing as 'a metaphor or figure of speech' (Cordner, 2014: 148) and posited that it functions more as a philosophy, or even 'a set of aspirations wrapped in a slogan', than an explicit model or programme (Bayley, 1988, cited in

O'Reilly, 2024: 2). Oxford (1984: 115) captures well the broadness and ambiguity of community policing in his observation that 'it seems to mean all things to all men'.

Attempts to define community policing have tended to rest upon its central aims and attributes, about which there appears a relative degree of consensus (Ramshaw, 2012). At the broadest level, community policing is 'an umbrella term describing a broad "family" of initiatives' concerning the organisation and capabilities of the police (Johnston and Shearing, 2003: 73–74). More specifically, it refers to an approach in which the priorities, arrangement and delivery of policing consult and are informed by the voices of local citizens (Myhill and Bradford, 2013; Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015). As Boateng (1984: 158, emphasis in original) states, '[c]ommunity policing by its very implication means *involving the community in the policing decisions*'. For Skogan (2006: 5), this involvement is to such an extent that it gives much of the responsibility for 'setting [local police] priorities and the means of achieving them… to residents'. Read in this way, community policing represents more of a process than an outcome (Skogan, 2006: 5). With an emphasis on addressing the specific issues of a given community, community policing, by design and in practice, operates in different ways within different places to address different problems (Cordner, 2014; O'Reilly, 2024).

The objective of addressing local issues speaks to the problem-solving goals of community policing (Moore, 1992; Gill et al., 2014). Originally coined by Herman Goldstein (1979; 1990), problem-solving policing, or problem-orientated policing (POP), refers to a policing strategy that concentrates on identifying, analysing and resolving the underlying causes of crime and disorder, as opposed to simply responding to incidents as they happen (COP, 2022a). In short, POP can be defined as the 'in-depth exploration of the substantive problems that the police are called on to tackle and the development and evaluation of tailor-made responses to them' (Bullock et al., 2022: 1087). Research suggests that problem-solving approaches can improve the effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy of the police and have a positive impact on tackling crime and public safety concerns (Eck and Spelman, 1987; Weisburd et al., 2008; Clarke and Scott, 2020; Hinkle et al., 2020; 2024).

Under community policing models, the problem-solving emphasis tends to be focused broadly on resolving the 'quality of life' issues that matter most to community members (Willard and Bartgis, 1998: 491; Alderson, 1979). This priority is grounded in the logic that by resolving these kinds of issues, the police are better placed to achieve the trust of community members, secure perceptions of legitimacy, build a positive relationship with the public and police more effectively (Morash and Ford, 2002, cited in Langstaff et al., 2015: 9; Skogan and Hartnett, 1997: 5). Captured in this logic are key foundational philosophies upon which British policing is based: the 'policing by consent' model and the Peelian principles.

Community-orientated approaches have a long history in British policing on the basis that they model the Peelian principles. These nine principles consist of a set of guidelines that underpin the ideologies of the British model of policing (Emsley, 1997). A long-held perspective was that the principles had been originally formed to direct the 1829 establishment and mandate of the first professional police force in London, the Metropolitan Police. Indeed, the 'Peelian' part of their denomination was derived from an assumption that they were drafted by the individual responsible for the force's formation, the then Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel, or at least by his first Commissioners, Charles Rowan and Richard Mayne. Over time scholars have challenged this assumption, instead suggesting that the principles have a more 'murky historical provenance' than previously thought (Loader, 2020: 3; Rogers, 2017: 7).[11] Regardless of their origins and despite their lack of any legal or constitutional footing, today the Peelian principles remain standing as foundational and aspirational tenets of the ethos of British policing (Loader, 2016; Lumsden, 2017).[12] As Andrews (2025: 585) observes, the principles 'are now held up to be guiding and instructional ideals to be vaunted and exemplified by police officers'.

The Peelian principles (and thus the principles of British policing) are grounded in the 'policing by consent' philosophy (Home Office, 2012, Hough, 2021: 26). This philosophy regards a policing style whereby officers attain their power and achieve their objectives through the public's consent, rather than by force or coercion; 'police forces are not an arm of the state but servants of the community whose confidence they must secure' (Oxford, 1984: 114). In Goodson's (1984: 151) words, '[t]he classical philosophy of British policing has been founded upon the support of the public. That has to be earned'. This demonstrates a style distinguishable from militarised policing methods found elsewhere in the world (Emsley, 2009). The idea that the police are first and foremost a public service, rather than a force, is reiterated through the image of British officers as 'citizens in uniform'. This image is often impelled upon the foundational idea that the police are the public and that the public are the police (Home Office, 2012). Boateng (1984: 152) summarises well the community-orientated principles of British policing by suggesting that in this country, '[a]n ideal police service has its roots in the community from which it recruits its members, and it is responsive to the needs of the area in

[11] Today there exists a consensus that the Peelian principles were likely the work of policing scholar Charles Reith, and emerged in the 1950s, rather than the 1820s. It is thought that the principles represent Reith's attempt to distil the philosophy of Sir Robert Peel that underpinned the creation of the professional police (Emsley, 1997; Andrews, 2025).

[12] While the principles have retained a central position in framings of British policing over time, recently they have been subject to academic scrutiny on concerns about their validity, relevance and applicability to modern-day policing. Indeed, Loader (2016) and Andrews (2025) speak of reworking the principles so that they better reflect the contemporary policing and social landscapes.

which it works..., it is accountable to the public… and its composition reflects the community which it serves'.

When describing the British model of policing as community-orientated and grounded in public consent it is critical to emphasise that this framing is, fundamentally, an ideology. Though British officers are not routinely armed (excluding those in specialist firearms departments), it is also true that they retain the right to use reasonable and proportionate force where circumstances permit them to do so.[13] Officers also have the right, under specific circumstances, to enter premises, regardless of whether the owner of or persons within that premises consent to the police entering.[14] Thus, in literal terms, the police's power derives from legislation, not from the public's consent. As the Home Office (2012) clarifies, the 'policing by consent' principle does not regard the consent of any individual; 'No individual can choose to withdraw his or her consent from the police, or from a law'. Consequently, while its principles are undoubtedly influential in informing policing decisions and reform, community policing is perhaps best understood as functioning more as a rhetorical philosophy than a fixed model.

Community policing has manifested in inconsistent ways over time and space, with its priorities and approaches holding varying degrees of influence on how policing is organised and carried out. These ebbs and flows of emphasis on community policing have tended to reflect wider social, political and cultural shifts and trends (Savage, 2007a; Reiner, 2010). The following section demonstrates this point in the context of the popular, yet ultimately misguided, image of the police as crime-fighters.

3.1.1. The common (mis)conception of the police as crime-fighters and its implications for community policing models

It has long been believed that the main concern and aim of police work regard fighting and controlling crime (Bayley, 1994). For Loader (2020: 10), this idea 'has an obviousness about it… If the police are about anything, it is surely controlling crime'. Bolstering the crimefighting image is its assumed ability to reinforce the authority of the police and legitimise their existence and practice (Reiner, 2010; Loader, 2020). As Reiner (2003: 269) observes, '[t]he overall picture of crime and control presented in the media, whether fiction or news, is…

[13] This power is bestowed upon officers through specific legislation such as Section 117 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and Section 3 of the Criminal Law Act 1967.
[14] This power is governed by the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.

highly favourable to the police image. Crime is presented as a serious threat… that the police routinely tackle successfully because of their prowess and heroism'.

While the framing of the police as crime-fighters is a pervasive and deeply embedded image, studies have long shown that most policing does not concern matters of crime, nor (for the most part) do the police have the means to control or prevent crime (Banton, 1964; Bayley, 1994; Crawford, 2024). In the 1970s, Bittner (1974: 22) wrote that 'when one looks at what policemen actually do, one finds that criminal law enforcement is something that most of them do with the frequency located somewhere between virtually never and very rarely'. In the mid1990s, Bayley (1994: 30) estimated that only 7–10% of calls made to the police by the public related to crime. More recent research by the COP (2015: 9) substantiates this finding, revealing how crime-related incidents accounted for only 17% of all command-and-control calls. It can thus be said that the crime-fighter image provides 'a wholly unrealistic conception of policing', exposing a disparity between popular assumptions about police work and the realities of it (Rowe et al., 2024: 8).

As noted in Chapter Two (2.3.), a great deal of police work is, above all, concerned with maintaining social order, comprising duties involving addressing general welfare concerns, managing risk and responding to vulnerable people (Emsley, 2009; Loftus, 2009; Charman, 2017). It identified how these practices have led to conceptualisations of officers as peacekeepers, guardians and social workers. Such ideas do not only situate vulnerability as a core police focus and reinforce the inaccuracy of the crime-fighting image; they also imply how the tasks of everyday policing resonate with the principles and foci of community policing. This is evident through, for instance, the common objectives of assisting and engaging with citizens and working to resolve community problems, alongside a generally less exclusive focus on fighting crime and law enforcement (Emsley, 2009; 2014; Stoughton, 2016: 667).

While often recognised in academia that much of policing predominantly involves 'softer' community-focused duties and functions, beyond this realm this fact appears to be less acknowledged. Instead, in wider public discourse the crime-fighter police image tends to persist. For Bayley (1994: 16), the fact that the police do not control crime is known only by experts; to the public, it is 'one of the best kept secrets of modern life'. Research has revealed how within police institutions themselves, the crime-fighting rhetoric often prevails and hence constitutes a core component of police culture (Skogan, 2008; Loftus, 2009; Reiner, 2010). In Waddington's (1999: 117) words, '[t]here is little doubt that the occupational self-image of the police is that of "crime-fighters" and this not just a distortion of what they do, it is virtually a collective delusion'. Reiner (2010: 119) suggests that this self-image is driven by officers'

'sense of mission', underpinned and reproduced by dominating police occupational cultures of masculinity, bravado and a thirst for action (Smith and Gray, 1985; Silvestri, 2017). Foster (2003, cited in Brown, 2007: 194–195) identifies how the popular language of 'policemen', as opposed to the gender neutral 'police officers', implies a manifestation of these cultures.

The central position of the crime-fighting mandate carries implications for how community-orientated roles may be perceived within policing organisations. Specifically, as McCarthy (2013: 263) observes, the '"soft" policing activities have been traditionally considered inferior forms of police work compared with more authoritarian functions… which largely stem from a perspective associated with crime fighting'. In a similar vein, Manning (1977: 118) suggests that the 'routine service functions produce little self-esteem and may, in fact, contain risks to the policeman's dignity'. This finding has been widely supported, with research reporting how community-orientated work is often deemed as holding a subsidiary status on the view that it fails to capture the nature of so-called 'proper' police work (i.e. crime-focused duties) (Cain, 1973; Holdaway, 1983; Waddington, 1999). Relatedly, work has identified a tendency for officers to overemphasise their crime-fighting functions while underplaying the (more common) community-orientated ones (Davies and Thomas, 2008; Skogan, 2008). Although such perceptions are typically most prevalent among responsive policing workforces (Manning, 1977; Waddington, 1999), research suggests that they can exist in community-orientated departments like neighbourhood policing too (Fielding, 1995; Loftus, 2009).

As well as being embedded in occupational police culture, the crime-fighting image is reinforced in political discourse. According to Loader (2020: 11), the notion of the police as crime-fighters perseveres in politics 'not because it is rooted in police practice, but because it has a powerful affective appeal'. This follows the notion that by simplifying the police role in terms of crime control, governments can present policing as a clear solution to the social problems ostensibly driven by crime. A crime-focused police mandate in politics is reinforced under traditional performance measures such as crime statistics, numbers of arrests and response times (O'Neill, 2014; Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015).

It is important to highlight that efforts to tackle crime are not mutually exclusive with community-orientated approaches. Indeed, reducing crime has often featured as an objective of community policing strategies and, as noted in this chapter's following sections, this objective has been made explicit across neighbourhood policing models (Gill et al., 2014). However, under community-orientated policing styles, crime control does not represent the *overriding* objective. Rather, it is encompassed within – and intended to be attained through achieving – the broader aim of making the police more accountable and responsive to their local communities (Gül, 2024). Meanwhile, under crime-fighting agendas, crime control has

often been pushed as the police's 'main job' (Home Office, 1993: 4) or 'one objective' (May, 2011), thus driving forwards a narrow enforcement-focused police identity. Later sections of this chapter demonstrate how the leveraging of the crime-fighting mandate have caused community policing models to be sidelined on the basis that the latter lack the same symbolic resonance and 'political purchase' of the former (Loader, 2020: 11).

This section illustrated how ideas of community policing are enshrined within the core principles of the British police. It has also suggested that wider social, political and cultural forces and trends can impact the level of importance assigned to community-orientated styles at any one time. These forces and trends can contribute to ideas that undermine, or at least question, the value of community policing approaches. Conversely, these forces can also provide momentum for community policing. An example of this momentum is provided by the context surrounding the emphasis on community policing that emerged in the mid- to late20th century, as the next section explores. This discussion is included in this chapter's outline of neighbourhood policing because, as Savage (2007b: 213) states, the 20th century community policing model can be seen as providing a 'clear blueprint' for the subsequent formation of neighbourhood policing.

3.2. Community policing in the mid- to late-20th century

The model of community policing that emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s followed an array of broader trends and transformations that shaped both the policing landscape and British society at large. The 1960s and 1970s marked a period of significant social, cultural and economic change. In the decades following the World War II, society was marked by various fiscal crises, growing rates of unemployment and deprivation, political unrest and civil rights movements, alongside spikes in immigration levels and birth rates (Reiner, 2010). During this time, questions and criticisms regarding the effectiveness and legitimacy of state institutions, particularly the police, also arose (Emsley, 2009). Hough (2021: 23) notes how social unrest and inequalities can enhance public mistrust of the police because the police are 'to an extent, necessarily symbols of the state'. Thus, the people who feel disadvantaged by broad social structures become 'unlikely to confer legitimacy on those institutions that serve to maintain the status quo', i.e. the conditions perceived as creating or at least reaffirming that disadvantage (Hough, 2021: 23–24). These forces can be understood as factors that influence public attitudes towards policing without necessarily involving any specific encounters with or actions of the police. They are important because they illustrate how public trust in the police is shaped by the broader social and political contexts within which policing operates.

There are, of course, more direct forces that shape public perceptions of the police, namely those which stem from policing itself. Between the 1960s and early 1980s, mounting accusations of police corruption and misconduct emerged, particularly regarding the treatment of minority groups (Cumberbatch and Tadesse, 1987). These concerns flowed post-1950s, a decade sometimes dubbed the 'golden age' of policing on the sense that during it, the police experienced generally positive engagements with the communities and enjoyed relatively high levels of public trust (Emsley, 2009; Reiner, 2010). Low crime rates during the 1950s offered credence to the idea of officers as effective, benevolent and committed public servants, an image which became woven into the national culture and identity (Emsley, 2009). For Reiner (2010: 70), by the 1950s, the police appeared to have achieved 'the wholehearted approval of the majority of the population'. However, some scholars have questioned the accuracy of describing this period as a 'golden age'.[15]

For Cockcroft (2015: 184), a 'protracted turning point' during the 1960s resulted in a reconfiguration of dominant public ideas of the police. To some degree, this was underpinned by the rapid development of technology which saw policing undergo a process of modernisation. Police cars, rather than foot, become the prominent means through which local patrols were conducted, and growths in radio use meant that officers became increasingly reliant on correspondence with each other and police headquarters for information, rather than with the public as had been the case previously (Alderson, 1984; Bullock, 2014). Such developments were designed to increase police efficiency by enabling officers to attend incidents more quickly and across much wider spatial areas. However, they came at a cost, namely reductions in inter-personal contact and connection between the police and community members (Longstaff et al., 2015: 9; Higgins, 2018: 8). As Holdaway (1977: 126) speculates, the '[f]un and excitement, generated by the use of cars and radios' came to replace the important everyday interactions traditionally shared by the police and the public. For Millie and Herrington (2004: 3) these modernisation processes damaged citizens' relationships with and trust in the police and, in hindsight, perhaps brought about 'more harm than good'.

The disconnect between the police and the public during this time was compounded through the move towards a centralised and bureaucratic structure whereby police priorities and resource allocations were to be more directed by government than the wants of individual communities. This shift was designed to professionalise operations and enhance efficiency and effectiveness which would, it was presumed, improve public trust in the police (McLaughlin,

[15] Loader (1997: 13) suggests that from a practical standpoint, the limited evidence available from this period makes it impossible to substantiate with certainty claims of this era as a 'golden age' of policing, From a more critically engaged perspective, Reiner (2010: 68) highlights that while positive ideas of the police might have been a vogue interpretation, 'considerable malpractice and corruption' may have still been occurring, calling into question the validity of framing this era a 'golden' one.

2007; Reiner, 2010). Instead, such strategies contributed to building a model deemed as 'unresponsive' to the public and more 'police-orientated rather than community-orientated' (Longstaff et al., 2015: 10; Goldstein, 1979). Soaring rates of crime – increasing from threequarters of a million in 1960 to one-and-a-half million by 1970 (Oxford, 1984: 115) – also likely contributed to declining public trust in the police during this era (Higgins, 2018a: 8).

Allegations of the police harassing and discriminating against vulnerable and marginalised people – particularly members of black communities –catalysed a breakdown of relations between the police and certain social groups and compounded public mistrust in the police in the mid- to late-20th century (Reiner, 2010: 94–95). Bolstered by the social unrest and economic instability of the broader social landscape, this deterioration culminated in various outbreaks of violence and riots across the country (Benyon, 1984).[16] Among the most famous are the Brixton riots in April 1981 where a volatile confrontation and struggle between the police and thousands of citizens resulted in hundreds of people being injured and widespread property damage occurring. The outbreak followed 'Operation Swamp 81', a large-scale local stop and search initiative by the Metropolitan Police in the Brixton area which saw almost 1000 stop and searches take place and over 100 arrests be made in less than a week in April 1981. Most of the citizens involved were black (The Guardian, 2021). The scale and intensity of the unrest exposed what had grown into deep-rooted fractures in the police's relationship with the public, especially marginalised communities (Savage, 2007a; Unsworth, 1982).

The Scarman Report (1981), commissioned by the Home Secretary, was the official inquiry into the Brixton riots. It stated that racial and social disadvantage, economic exclusion and poor community-police relations had sparked the riots. Lord Scarman (1981: 64) found that racist and discriminatory practice 'does occur and every instance of it has an immense impact on community attitudes and beliefs'. He (1981: 110) also identified how the discriminatory policing of black people had remained 'a major source of social tension and conflict' and made urgent calls for reforms. Along with emphasising the need to improve local police accountability and training, the report argued that policing needed to reprioritise efforts to secure the active consent, support and involvement of the community. For Scarman, the system of the British police 'without the consent of the general public… simply will not work' (Griffiths, 1984: 128). Essentially, the report framed community policing strategies dedicated

[16] Beyond the Brixton riots, other such events during this era include a police raid on a café in the St Pauls district of Bristol, an area with a large Afro-Caribbean population, in April 1980. The raid was seen by many community members as an example of racial discrimination and over-policing (Reicher, 1984). Further riots happened in the aftermath of the 1981 Brixton riots, including in Merseyside (Cooper, 1985), Manchester (Wain and Joyce, 2012) and Birmingham (Unsworth, 1982).

to the police engaging positively and working with the public as vital to restoring public trust in, and the effective functioning of, the police.

Lord Scarman's recommendations echoed earlier campaigns for reform, most notably those of John Alderson, Chief Constable of Devon and Cornwall between 1973 and 1982. Alderson was a key critic of the centralised, modernised approach to policing that had emerged the 1960s and 1970s. He saw this model as too far removed from the needs of local communities and argued for a more community-centred approach that emphasised local accountability, proactive engagement and problem-solving (Alderson, 1979; 1984). Alderson (1979: 240) ranked community policing a 'first tier policing strategy', calling for the police to shift emphasis away from fighting crime and towards addressing the concerns of communities (Reiner, 2000: 68; Myhill, 2006: 13). '[S]wimming… against the tide of British policing' that was operating during this period, Alderson's ideas were somewhat novel at his time of writing, but they gained traction in the aftermath of Lord Scarman's inquiry (Savage, 2007b: 211).

By the early 1980s, events like the Brixton riots and the work of community policing pioneers like Scarman and Alderson helped reveal the extent to which British policing had departed from its community-centred traditions (Tilley, 2008; Reiner, 2010). Cumberbatch and Tadesse (1987: 47) argue that at this time, 'community policing came to be seen as the panacea' to resolving the mounting social unrest and rapid deterioration of police-public relations. This marked a reorientation in approaches to policing (Ramshaw, 2012). As Oxford (1984: 129) observed in the mid-1980s, 'the argument turns full circle. The call is now for a return to traditional policing'. This return, Higgins (2018a: 8) suggests, involved (re)developing a community-orientated approach that shifted policing from an 'authoritarian to consensual style'. It is this model that provides a 'blueprint' for that of neighbourhood policing (Savage, 2007b: 213).

Despite earlier calls for, and the apparent promise of, a return to a more community-focused model of policing in the 1980s, this agenda was somewhat displaced by other political priorities. Against a backdrop of rising recorded crime and declining public confidence in the police, John Major's Conservative government, in office between 1990 and 1997, placed renewed emphasis on the police's responsive crime-fighting function. The 1993 White Paper setting out the government's proposals for police reform stated that 'the main job of the police is to catch criminals' (Home Office, 1993: 4). Although community-orientated duties remained present, including expectations that the police should 'work… with local people' and 'consult the public about the work of the police', these were reframed within a more explicit crime-control agenda (Home Office, 1993: 20). The same document (1993: 20) emphasised that 'it is equally important for people to be told how they can help the police in the fight against

crime' (Home Office, 1993: 20). In this formulation, public engagement was increasingly positioned as a means of supporting the police's crime-fighting objectives, rather than as a broader commitment to community responsiveness and local accountability.

The approach of Major's government to policing reform provides one example of the pattern identified in Section 3.1.1., whereby responses to broader social and political currents have sometimes prioritised crime-fighting agendas while sidelining community policing approaches (Higgins, 2018a: 8). A similar trajectory unfolded during the 2010s, as Section 3.4. explores. However, whereas reform in the 2010s was driven primarily by efforts to reduce public spending, the crime-centred agenda of the 1990s rested on the assumption that narrowing police attention towards crime control and performance targets would both halt rising crime levels and restore public confidence in the police (Innes, 2004a: 155; Longstaff et al., 2015: 9). However, when recorded crime began to fall in the mid- to late 1990s, public fear of crime not only remained high but continued to rise. This exposed what came to be known as the 'reassurance gap': the disjuncture between falling crime rates and persistent public insecurity (Fielding and Innes, 2006; Herrington and Millie, 2006). In response to this gap, and alongside changes in government, police priorities were reconfigured once again and community policing approaches subsequently resurfaced with renewed significance (3.3.)

This section outlined how community policing approaches moved in and out of favour across the mid- to late-20th century. These fluctuations were shaped by wider social, political and institutional developments, meaning that interest in community policing rose and fell in response to changing pressures both within and beyond policing. The remainder of this chapter demonstrates that the subsequent development of neighbourhood policing followed a similar trajectory, experiencing varying investment and attention levels depending on evolving agendas and concerns.

3.3. The launch of neighbourhood policing under New Labour

While the essence of neighbourhood policing is undoubtedly inspired by, and even grounded in, the philosophies of community-orientated styles, it is not an identical nor indistinguishable iteration of community policing. Rather, neighbourhood policing is the product of a complex and gradual process of development that has been (and continues to be) shaped and driven by many different factors (Higgins and Hales, 2017; O'Reilly, 2024). The model is thus best understood as a 'matter of mixed parentage' whose 'family tree… has many branches' (Savage, 2007b: 204, 213). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, its launch comprised several stages, before it was officially rolled out nationally in 2008. The original formation and implementation of

neighbourhood policing was steered by Tony Blair's New Labour Government. According to O'Reilly (2024: 4), this government's 'philosophical and political position' was 'the most important impetus behind what is now recognised as neighbourhood policing in the UK'. Its launch can be broadly divided between two overarching phases which this section outlines.

3.3.1. The National Reassurance Policing Programme (2003 – 2005)

The first model of neighbourhood policing gave emphasis to what was widely referred to as 'reassurance policing', delivered through the National Reassurance Policing Programme (NRPP). Reassurance policing was originally developed to address the aforementioned 'reassurance gap' that had emerged during the 1990s (Millie and Herrington, 2005). The central objective was to address public perceptions of crime, rather than to tackle crime specifically (Millie and Herrington, 2004; Tuffin et al., 2006; Herrington and Millie, 2006). This goal was to be pursued through providing the public with a more visible, accessible and familiar police service (Povey, 2001).

'At the heart of reassurance policing' sat the signal crimes perspective (SCP) (Tuffin et al., 2006: 18; Innes, 2004b; 2014). According to the SCP, which offered a developed version of the broken windows theory,[17] certain neighbourhood characteristics, or signals, incite among residents in that neighbourhood feelings of insecurity on a subjective basis (Innes and Fielding, 2002; Tuffin et al., 2006). In other words, not all signals are interpreted equally; different people perceive different risks as having different signal values. Thus, reassurance policing was rooted in the idea that police priorities should be determined following consultation with local residents to establish what 'signals' evoked the most feelings of unsafety to enable the police to target the issues that 'matter[ed] most' to them (Innes, 2014: 75–76; Barker, 2014: 3050). The reduction of crime was not originally listed as a central objective of the NRPP because the SCP had indicated that community priorities were more likely to focus upon antisocial behaviour than crime (Tuffin et al., 2006: 3). However, it was expected that crime would be reduced by achieving the NRPP's aims of improving public perceptions of safety and satisfaction with, and trust in, the police (Tuffin et al., 2006: 3–4).

During this time, police community support officers (PCSOs) were introduced under the Police Reform Act 2002. These auxiliary uniformed officers were designed to reassure the public by delivering visible patrol and, in doing so, improving the police's accessibility and familiarity

[17] Wilson and Kelling's broken windows theory (1982) argues that visible signs of disorder and neglect in a neighbourhood—such as broken windows, graffiti, public drunkenness, or vandalism—send a signal that an area is uncared for and unprotected. They suggest that this signal encourages further disorder and more serious crime.

to their local communities (ACPO, 2006; Rogers, 2017: 81). PCSOs were intended to be the 'main delivery agent' of reassurance policing (Greig-Midlane, 2019: 231) and the 'public face of policing' (O'Neill, 2014: 265). Often described as 'second-tier' officers, PCSOs receive partial training and powers compared to officers to enable them to dedicate their time exclusively to the 'softer' community-orientated functions (Millie, 2010: 226; Barker, 2014: 3050). While there was some initial uncertainty as to the precise mandate and contribution of these new officers (Crawford et al., 2005; Johnston, 2005; Merritt, 2010), a national evaluation of PCSOs by the Home Office found that they made valuable contributions to resolving local issues, reassuring the public and engaging with community members (Cooper et al., 2006). For O'Neill (2014: 266), PCSOs under the New Labour government constituted 'a vital resource in spreading the visible police presence further and more consistently than had been the case before'.

A Home Office review of the NRPP reported a 15 per cent increase in people's perceptions of the police in their community 'doing an excellent or good job', compared to a three per cent increase in the control sites (Tuffin et al., 2006: xiv). The rise in public satisfaction with, and trust in, the police, were interpreted as the programme 'demonstrat[ing] clear positive results' (Tuffin et al., 2006: xv). Furthermore, residents reported not only heightened senses of safety but also lower levels of victimisation, implying improvements to both feelings and actual levels of security (Tuffin et al., 2006: 36–37). It thus appeared that the NRPP's model had successfully attained its goals of 'improv[ing] public perceptions of crime and antisocial behaviour, feelings of safety, and confidence in the police' (Higgins, 2018a: 9). A later study by Quinton and Morris (2008) indicated that the programme's success had been sustained beyond the first year of the trial.

3.3.2. The Neighbourhood Policing Programme (2004 – 2008)

One year before the NRPP was scheduled to finish, the government published a White Paper that committed to a national roll-out of neighbourhood policing (Home Office, 2004). This was to be delivered under the Neighbourhood Policing Programme (NPP). The term 'reassurance' was exchanged for 'neighbourhood' on the premise that the latter provided a more accurate label by explicitly referencing the aspect of place and the sense of the collective (Millie and Herrington, 2005: 52; Innes, 2005: 159). The NPP, supported by a budget of £50 million and the recruitment of 25,000 PCSOs across England and Wales, imposed on every force the duty to create a dedicated NPT by 2008. Bolstered by the success of the NRPP, the police mission remained concerned with 'providing a visible, reassuring presence', though this

aim was now accompanied by that of 'preventing and detecting crime' (Home Office, 2004: 7). The inclusion of a focus on reducing actual crime levels was unsurprising. As Fitzgerald et al. (2002, cited in Longstaff et al., 2015: 11, emphasis added) observe, '[i]t is difficult to justify devoting limited police resources to policing activity that serves only to give people *the impression* they are safer from crime'.

For Quinton and Morris (2008), the inclusion of a crime fighting priority marked a distinction in approach from traditional community policing. They (2008: 3) note how under earlier community-orientated styles, reducing crime and disorder had been 'a secondary objective to that of improving community relations with the police'. Under the new neighbourhood policing model, the goals of increasing community involvement and trust in the police remained (Flanagan, 2008; Millie, 2014). However, police engagement with the public was now intended to function not just as an end but also as a means, specifically a means of 'directing the work of local officers towards the crime and disorder problems that cause the most public concern' (Quinton and Morris, 2008: 3). Therefore, the problem-solving focus of neighbourhood policing had evolved from one primarily centred upon restoring police-public relations to 'dealing with crime and disorder more intelligently *and* building new relationships between the police and the public' (Rogers, 2017: 71, emphasis added). Alongside this developed problem-solving dimension, the emphasis remained on central government devolving responsibility for policing priorities and accountability towards the individual forces and their respective communities (Fleming and McLaughlin, 2012; Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015). Indeed, echoing traditional community policing agendas, ensuring that the public would 'have a direct say in the policing of their area' was situated as a central strand of neighbourhood policing (Moore, 2008: 191).

Evaluations of the programme revealed mixed findings. Casey (2008) found the high visibility and accessibility of PCSOs to have retained its benefits; generally speaking, these officers were positively received by residents, considered more approachable and reachable than other police officers and better at gaining the public's trust and confidence. A review of the evidence conducted by Rix et al. (2009) suggested that initiatives designed to improve community engagement were the most effective means of improving public confidence. Meanwhile, an HMIC report (2008) noted how the interpretations and implementation of neighbourhood policing within some forces were inconsistent, resulting in fragmented public engagement. Mason (2009) also highlighted a lack of consistency and understanding across forces, prompting him to call for greater cohesion in the national implementation of the initiative. A research-based discussion paper by Foster and Jones (2010: 396) revealed that the focus of some neighbourhood departments remained geared towards 'the performance ball', exhibiting a reluctance to abandon statistical measures of success and leaving them stuck on the 'familiar

path' of response-orientated policing. Casey's (2008) research also revealed that the problem-solving element of neighbourhood policing was frequently underdeveloped, materialising in the patchy and sometimes out-of-date publication of details from consultation meetings between the police and public. This brought about a rise of calls for the police to do better at engaging with, listening and responding to the wants and needs of their communities during the NPP's roll out (Higgins, 2018a: 7).

Criticisms of the programme were softened by acknowledgements that it represented an ambitious attempt to scale-up the relatively small NRPP trial (Quinton and Morris, 2008: vi; Mason, 2009: 5). The neighbourhood policing model was defended on the grounds that the issues experienced were short-term problems of implementation, rather than deep-rooted conceptual or design weaknesses; as Mason (2005: 5) appreciated, Chicago's equivalent model of neighbourhood policing had taken over eight years to properly embed itself into practice and have its benefits fully realised. The importance of continued commitment to neighbourhood policing was thus expressed, following a consensus that the issues encountered would most likely resolve themselves providing that necessary time was afforded to them to do so (Quinton and Morris, 2008; Casey, 2008; Mason, 2009).

By the end of the initial roll-out scheme in 2008, the government reported that all forces had successfully integrated neighbourhood policing as standard practice (Home Office, 2008). Substantively informed by the reports of Casey (2008) and Flanagan (2008), an intention to continue implementing neighbourhood policing was revealed, reinstating the government's commitment to a policing model orientated towards, and accountable to, local communities. At the same time, plans were published for the 'Policing Pledge', a set of promises made by each police force to provide their communities with a responsive, visible, accessible and fair service (Home Office, 2008). As part of the Pledge, the government announced that police performance was to be measured by one overarching metric: the single confidence target. This target was designed to quantify and drive improvements in public perceptions of the ability and success of the police and their partners in 'dealing with the crime and antisocial behaviour issues that matter locally' (Hansard, 2009). The target, which was to be measured using British Crime Survey statistics, pledged to increase confidence levels from the national average of 45% in 2009 to 60% by 2012. The target demonstrated that while problem-solving approaches to tackling rates of crime were important to the neighbourhood policing strategy, so too was reassuring the public, reducing fear of crime and improving trust in the police.

In what was to be its final white paper on police reform, the New Labour government published in 2009 'Protecting the public: supporting the police to succeed' (Home Office, 2009).

Described as a 'self-congratulatory document' (Fleming and McLaughlin, 2012: 290), the paper credited the Labour governments of Tony Blair (between 1997–2007) and Gordon Brown (2007–2010) for securing a 'record of success' of police reform and establishing a nationally embedded model of neighbourhood policing (Home Office, 2009: 7). It proceeded to claim that the police service, having enjoyed several years of sustained investment, was 'well-placed to meet the developing challenges ahead' (Home Office, 2009: 5). However, in the following year, a change in government and the implementation of significant cuts to policing budgets marked a prompt end to neighbourhood policing's progression, as the next section examines.

3.4. Austerity and the retrenchment of neighbourhood policing (2010–2017)

In 2010, a coalition government formed by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats came into power armed with an intention to shrink the country's budget deficit in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. What ensued was a nearly decade-long programme of austerity, marked by severe public spending cuts and the promotion of private sector involvement. For neoliberals, it looked like 'a dream come true' (Farnsworth and Irving, 2018: 461) as budgets reductions were introduced across the public sector, including within policing. Subsequently and significantly, police officer numbers shrank by more than 20,000 over an eight-year period, from 143,734 in March 2010 to 122,404 in March 2018 (Home Office, 2018). Moreover, the effects of austerity were not experienced evenly across policing departments; neighbourhood policing was hit especially hard (Unison, 2016). This was in part a consequence of the new government's agenda that the primary mission of the police was 'to cut crime' (Home Office, 2010: 8). During a speech at a Conservative party conference in 2011, Theresa May (2011), the Home Secretary at the time, stated: 'Some people question why we're reforming the police. For me, the reason is simple. We need them to be the tough, no-nonsense crime-fighters they signed up to become'. This revealed how, just as it had in the 1990s, the crime-fighting police mandate became emphasised once again. This time, this simplification of the police role was used by the government to justify shrinking public sector budgets (Greig-Midlane, 2019).

The police's 'one objective – to cut crime' – was accompanied by only minimal reference to the reassurance functions of the police (May, 2011). These functions, which had been brought into the very centre of the police mandate in the decade prior, were diminished, condensed into a single statement that the police should contribute to 'making people feel safe' (Home Office, 2010: 8). The crime-fighting focus prompted the prioritisation of reactive policing approaches,

which came at the expense of neighbourhood policing (Millie, 2014; O'Neill, 2014; Higgins, 2018a). No longer deemed instrumental to policing, neighbourhood policing was viewed instead as a 'bolt-on extra' (Millie, 2010: 231) that was 'nice to do but not essential' (Foster and Jones, 2010: 395). Its ringfenced funding was removed, its budget was severely diminished, the 'Policing Pledge', along with the single confidence target, was scrapped and crime-centred performance-based targets were reinstated.

The implications of the austerity measures for neighbourhood policing were, unsurprisingly, seismic. While officer numbers fell across the board, the numbers of those within local policing roles (including neighbourhood policing) experienced a greater loss. Statistics published by the Home Office (2018) showed that between March 2015 and March 2018, the number of officers in these positions had dropped from 61,083 to 53,822. In the eight years between March 2010 and March 2018, PCSO numbers had reduced by 40%, from 16,918 to 10,139.

Further data as to the effects of the government cuts on neighbourhood policing were provided through research conducted by Unison (2016), the UK's largest union representing full- and part-time staff working in the provision of public services. In collating responses to a survey completed by PCSOs in April 2016, Unison's research found that 74% of respondents observed a reduction of PCSO numbers in their NPT and 77% said that, since they started working as a PCSO, their NPT had become less visible. The report revealed that 57% of respondents reported that they had stopped performing some core neighbourhood policing duties and were instead deployed to tasks which kept them 'off the beat' and 53% noted that they regularly dealt with work that should be the responsibility of other agencies, such as the health service and social services.

Elsewhere, research garnered similar conclusions. O'Neill (2014) revealed how high abstraction levels of PCSOs from their community-orientated duties were impeding their contribution to policing. In Higgins and Hales' (2017: 7) work, a local police officer described how the eroded role of PCSOs had left them 'drifting along without a clear mandate', resulting in them being treated as 'a spare resource'.

For neighbourhood policing more broadly, HMIC's (2017: 26) investigation into the state of policing revealed 'longstanding concerns that the bedrock of neighbourhood policing is being eroded… As the resources available to neighbourhood policing teams dwindle, the ability of officers to devote time to local communities diminishes'. Similarly, Higgins and Hales (2017: 12) uncovered concerns among senior police officers that 'local policing would be reduced to a "blue light" emergency service, taken back to the 1970s, and forced to operate in an increasingly "paramilitary" style'. In the same vein, Higgins (2018a) found that since 2010, the blurring of boundaries between neighbourhood policing and response-led approaches had

resulted in the fragmentation and retrenchment of the former. He revealed how police forces had generally struggled to establish a precise and consistent approach to providing neighbourhood policing and were experiencing challenges in efforts to deliver it in an effective and cost-efficient way.

Importantly, and pertinent to this thesis, as well as identifying a shift towards 'servicing reactive demand', Higgins (2018a: 2) also found that neighbourhood policing was becoming increasingly concerned with 'vulnerability/harm prevention'. While some implications of this shift for neighbourhood officers were identified (e.g. the growth of case-based, multi-agency approaches for managing vulnerability and problem-solving with more emphasis on risk mitigation), exactly how the prioritisation of vulnerability was being operationalised within neighbourhood policing has not yet been fully explored.

To summarise, reforms under the coalition government prompted an overhaul of policing, the impact of which fell disproportionately on neighbourhood policing. In a climate of prevailing crime-fighting priorities, the place for and value of community-orientated approaches were called into question and ultimately undermined. Marking a clear departure from the community-focused agendas that had come to characterise policing reform in the decade prior, neighbourhood policing from the mid-2010s was left fractured and experiencing something of an 'identity crisis' (Higgins and Hales, 2017: 15). Despite doubts about its future (HMIC, 2017), neighbourhood policing survived the austerity years and has since (re)assumed a more securing standing, having gone through 'something of a renaissance' recently (O'Reilly, 2024: 120). The next section outlines the post-austerity neighbourhood policing landscape.[18]

3.5. Neighbourhood policing since austerity: the contemporary landscape

Since the years of austerity, a reconfiguration of policing priorities appears to have emerged, with the importance of neighbourhood policing being recognised once again. In 2016, the National Police Chiefs' Council (2016) published the Policing Vision 2025, a national document agreed upon by all forces that set out the ten-year plan for British policing. It

[18] The end of austerity cuts to policing was indicated in 2017 by the government announcing a £450 million increase in police funding (Home Office, 2017). The end of austerity across the board was declared in 2019 by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and later reaffirmed by the Prime Minister (BBC News, 2019a). However, spending cuts under the subsequent Conservative governments of Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, and Rishi Sunak, followed by the current Labour government's plans to shrink the welfare budget and Civil Service running costs, has prompted the question: 'Is the UK stuck in a permanent state of austerity?' (Keen, 2025). Nevertheless, for policing at least, funding has increased annually since 2016 (Home Office, 2024b).

declared the Council's endorsement in neighbourhood policing and committed to supporting the resolution of local problems and building of community trust in the police. It (2016: 3) specified how '[t]he link between communities and the police will continue to form the bedrock of British policing' and emphasised multi-agency working as a critical means of tackling community issues.

For Higgins (2018a: 15), the purpose of local policing as detailed in the Policing Vision 2025 was framed 'in terms of public protection, safety, and "need"; public reassurance, feelings of safety and communities' explicit requests, are recessive if not absent'. Indeed, the Policing Vision detailed that every NPT should adopt a proactive approach to assessing threat, risk, harm and vulnerability and protecting vulnerable people. A neighbourhood policing model informed by vulnerability-related priorities is reaffirmed by the PEEL inspections, in which the evaluation of how forces prevent and deter crime and antisocial behaviour, and reduce vulnerability includes an assessment of their neighbourhood policing practices (HMICFRS, 2023). Furthermore, COP (2019: 13) guidelines state that chief officers should ensure neighbourhood policing activities are targeted according to community needs while 'taking account of threat, risk, harm and vulnerability. Similarly, the National Policing Digital Strategy (NPCC and APCC, 2020: 17) stipulates 'proactive identification of Threat, Harm and Risk [is] to inform proactive neighbourhood (or community) policing approaches'. Indicated throughout such policy is a move towards a more standardised neighborhood policing model that is, across all areas, geared towards matters of vulnerability and risk, regardless the specific concerns and conditions of individual communities.

In more contemporary times, neighbourhood policing and its core community-orientated principles have been positioned at the very heart policing reform by the recent Labour government led by Sir Kier Starmer. The 'Safer Streets Mission', included as part of the government's 'Plan for Change' publication, details its commitment to investing in and delivering an established model of neighbourhood policing (HM Government, 2024). The policy identifies the contemporary problems facing policing as falls in public confidence and trust and the diminishment of neighbourhood policing. It (2024: 31) noted how neighbourhood officers were being 'pulled off the beat to plug shortages elsewhere, weakening connections with communities they serve'.

The Safer Streets Mission sets out a two-part long-term aim for government: to 'reduce serious harm and increase public confidence in policing and in the criminal justice system' (HM Government, 2024: 32). Alongside reducing actual crime levels, the government's strategy reveals plans to address '*concerns* over increased levels of crime' (Oxley and Downs, 2025, emphasis added). This indicates how restoring the public's confidence in the police and sense

of safety have once again become key foci. The role of neighbourhood policing in achieving these objectives was noted by the current Chief Executive Officer of the COP, Sir Andy Marsh who stated: 'Neighbourhood policing is a vital foundation of any police force if they are to be effective in cutting crime and helping people feel safe in their communities' (COP, 2024).

The contemporary priority of enhancing people's confidence in the police has been made further apparent by the COP's (2025b) recent document titled 'Improving public confidence in the police: An evidence-based guide'. Designed to support forces in increasing the confidence of their communities, it (2025b: 13–14) identifies how neighbourhood policing – through its key strands of targeted visible presence, community engagement and problem-solving – can improve public perceptions of and trust in the police.

Within its 'Safer Streets Mission', the government announced in April 2025 the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee (NPG). Under a commitment to 'transform neighbourhood policing', the guarantee promises to achieve six pledges which are set out in Table 3.1. (HM Government, 2024: 34).

Table 3.1.: The NPG pledges

Pledge	Description
Police back on the beat.	Every local area will have a neighbourhood policing team responsible for conduct intelligence-led, visible patrols. These teams will be protected to ensure they remain focused on serving their communities.
Community-led policing.	Every neighbourhood will have a named, contactable officer who responds to local issues. Input from community members will help inform police priorities in their area.
Clear performance standards and professional excellence.	A new Police and Crime and Performance Unit will set up a single performance framework for policing that outlines minimum standards on neighbourhood policing.
A new neighbourhood policing career pathway.	New training for neighbourhood officers and standards for professional excellence will ensure neighbourhood policing's development as a specialist policing capability.
A crackdown on anti-social behaviour.	Tougher powers and the support of other agencies will be given to neighbourhood policing teams to allow them to crack down on persistent antisocial behaviour.
Safer town centres.	Neighbourhood policing teams will tackle shop theft, street theft and assaults against retail workers so that local streets can be reclaimed by community members.

A central commitment of the NPG is the delivery of 13,000 additional neighbourhood officers, in the form of police officers, PCSOs and special constables, by 2029 (HM Government, 2024). An amount of £200 million – doubled from the original £100 million figure – has been allocated to forces to deliver the first steps of this process. This recruitment drive builds upon the Police Uplift Scheme, rolled out in 2020 under Boris Johnson's Conservative government. At the time, Johnson said: 'people want to see more officers in their neighbourhoods, protecting the public and cutting crime. I promised 20,000 extra officers and that recruitment will now start in earnest' (Gov.UK, 2019). Almost 21,000 new officers were employed between April 2020 and March 2023, meaning that by the end of the programme, the numbers which had been cut during the prior austerity years had been replaced (Home Office, 2023). A HMICFRS report (2024) revealed that many of these new officers had been placed into neighbourhood roles and forces were investing more money and time into neighbourhood policing. However, it also uncovered how neighbourhood officers were still being abstracted from their primary mandate of tackling community problems and instead being tasked with responsibilities traditionally reserved for response officers. The most recent HMICFRS report (2025) found that forces were making continued efforts to deliver effective neighbourhood policing. It reiterated the findings of the 2024 report, stating that the 20,000 officers recruited through the Uplift Scheme were 'beginning to help stabilise neighbourhood policing resourcing', but that too many were still being diverted from their neighbourhood duties to deal with other areas of demand. To curtail these high abstraction rates, the current government has announced plans to launch new national standards designed to protect the time of NPTs to ensure they remain present and visible in every local area (Home Office, 2025a).

Furthermore, the COP, in collaboration with the government, has developed the Neighbourhood Policing Training Programme and the Neighbourhood Policing Career Pathway. The former programme comprises a formal curriculum designed to teach the skills needed for officers in neighbourhood roles (COP, 2025a). After being piloted across 11 forces in June 2024, Part One of the programme has been rolled out nationally as part of the government's NPG (COP, 2025c). In addition, the Neighbourhood Policing Career Pathway provides a framework to help neighbourhood officers understand, plan and pursue professional growth within neighbourhood policing.[19] It includes structured in-role training to develop officers' skills in, for example, safeguarding, investigations and working with partners. Such programmes signal a renewed push to establish the value of neighbourhood policing. Whether they can genuinely challenge the entrenched occupational cultures and narratives that often

[19] Information about the Neighbourhood Policing Career Pathway is available at: https://www.college.police.uk/career-learning/career-development/career-pathways/neighbourhoodpolicing (accessed 05/11/25).

frame crime-fighting as ‘proper’ police work and sideline more community-focused approaches is yet to be known (3.3.1.).

The most recent White Paper on police reform, published January 2026, makes clear that the current government remains committed to prioritising, reinstating and supporting a national model of neighbourhood policing (Home Office, 2026). Across this 106-page document, the words ‘neighbourhood policing’ appear 66 times and its Executive summary (2026: 9) outlines the government’s pledges to ‘re-energise neighbourhood policing’, ‘remove the barriers that prevent the police from focusing on what matters to the public’ and ‘strengthen police governance to ensure it is better placed to deliver for local people’. The paper (2026: 24) also reaffirms the promises of the NPG concerning with protecting officers from routine abstraction and leaving them free to tackle the issues in their area and deliver visible, accessible and community-focused policing.

This section outlined recent policy indicating that neighbourhood policing has reassumed its position as an established, critical policing model. Clearly, the vision being pursued by the current Labour government looks much different to the eroded model of the austerity years. Promises to improve public confidence in the police, include community voices in setting local police priorities and guarantee visible, accessible and familiar neighbourhood officers in all areas echo the principles that underpinned New Labour’s models of reassurance and neighbourhood policing. Further still, parallels are clear between the NPG’s promise to put ‘police back on the beat’ (HM Government, 2024: 34) and Lord Scarman’s (1981: 88) calls for the return of ‘the friendly bobby-on-the-beat’ in the 1980s.

There are, however, subtle distinctions between today’s model and those of the past. Problem-solving approaches have always been a feature of community-orientated policing styles. This chapter outlined how traditionally the ‘problems’ to be ‘solved’ have included community engagement (as a means and an end), restoring public confidence and tackling crime and antisocial behaviour. Contemporary policy still treats these issues as core neighbourhood policing priorities, but they now sit alongside an overarching emphasis on vulnerability and risk existing across policing and wider social policy (Chapter Two). This shift suggests that neighbourhood policing may be entering a new phase, though what this next iteration looks like has not been explored in existing recent research.

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter traced the development of neighbourhood policing in England and Wales, from its community policing roots to the model currently envisioned by today’s Labour government. The renewed emphasis on neighbourhood policing today suggests that, after a long and

turbulent evolution, its importance has once again been recognised and its principles and practices re-prioritised. This reflects a familiar pattern, echoing earlier commitments to community policing that emerged during the 1980s and early 2000s.

However, these past trajectories indicate how moments of renewed recognition have tended to not only *follow* but also *foreshadow* de-prioritisations of community-orientated policing, as seen in the 1990s and 2010s. Broadly, these ebbs and flows have positioned community policing models either as areas for investment or as areas vulnerable to retrenchment when other priorities take precedence. Whether the current period of investment in neighbourhood policing can be sustained will likely depend on the model's capacity to adapt to wider policing and social developments (Higgins and Hales, 2017). The recent emergence of vulnerability as a central policing priority and organising concept points to one such development, suggesting that expectations around the objectives, work and delivery of neighbourhood policing have shifted (Higgins, 2017; 2018a). How neighbourhood policing operates under this broader contemporary emphasis on vulnerability is examined in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

Chapter Four: Research design, methods and reflections

This chapter outlines, justifies and reflects upon the methodological design and implementation process that underpin the thesis's empirical contribution. It is organised into six main sections. The first sets out the collaborative basis of the study along with the research aim and questions. The following section, which presents the research paradigm and design, explains why the study was framed through an interpretivist perspective and why it enlisted a qualitative exploratory case study approach that incorporated ethnographic methods. Background context to the research is then provided through overviews of the research partner, South Yorkshire Police (SYP), and the case study sites in which the fieldwork was conducted. Fourthly, the methods used to collect and analyse the data and recruit the participants are detailed. The penultimate section reviews key ethical issues and outlines the steps taken during the research to uphold proper ethical standards. The final section offers a critical reflection on my experience of conducting policing research as an 'outsider' – that is, as someone with no prior experience of conducting research with the police – and on how I navigated the 'outsider-insider' continuum as an academic researcher working within a policing environment. It also considers the study's limitations in relation to validity, reliability and researcher positionality. Taken together, the chapter's descriptive, evaluative and reflective elements seek to explain the research process and demonstrate the study's methodological rigour and integrity.

4.1. Research collaboration, aim and questions

This thesis was conducted in collaboration with SYP and funded by the ESRC through a studentship awarded by the WRDTP. The study was initially shaped by an established relationship between the supervisors at the University of Leeds and colleagues at SYP, who agreed at the outset of the collaboration that the research would explore vulnerability and neighbourhood policing. Following my appointment to the studentship, I assumed responsibility for the onward development and delivery of the study. Decisions about the direction and details of the research were made in consultation with a designated gatekeeper, an Inspector stationed at SYP's headquarters. A gatekeeper is defined as 'someone who has the power to decide who gets particular resources and opportunities, and who does not' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2026). Later sections of this chapter (4.3.2.; 4.4.1.; 4.6.1.) discuss how the gatekeeper's authority, input and support informed and facilitated this research.

The overarching aim of this research was to explore neighbourhood policing as a key site for the delivery of vulnerability-focused policing, understood as the combination of the processes through which police interpret, identify and respond to individuals perceived to be vulnerable. To achieve this objective, five guiding questions were addressed:

1. How do neighbourhood officers interpret the recent focus on vulnerability in policing and how do they situate their role in a policy landscape increasingly orientated towards vulnerability?
2. How do neighbourhood officers define vulnerability?
3. How do neighbourhood officers identify vulnerable people?
4. How do neighbourhood officers respond to vulnerable people?
5. What challenges do neighbourhood officers encounter in their delivery of vulnerability-focused policing?

To carry out this research, a research paradigm was required. This comprises a framework that a researcher uses to determine how their research should be approached and delivered, i.e. what methods a study should employ (Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Rapley, 2018). The next section details why the present research adopted an interpretivist perspective and how this paradigm informed the study's methodological approach, namely an exploratory case study that incorporated ethnographic traditions.

4.2. The research paradigm and design

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994: 105), a research paradigm can be defined as the 'basic belief system… that guides the investigation'. In short, it regards the researcher's 'worldview' (Rapley, 2018: 185) and what they 'perceive[…] to be truth, reality and knowledge' (Ryan, 2018: 14). Here, the philosophical branches of ontology, concerned with what can be said to be real and factual under existential conditions, and epistemology, relating to the nature, acquisition and purpose of knowledge itself, are key (Ejnavarzala, 2019). Across the philosophical realms of ontology and epistemology exists an objectivist–subjectivist continuum that denotes different assumptions about social reality. Social reality through an objectivist lens is framed as 'a concrete given' while a subjectivist perspective situates it as 'imagined in and therefore a product of the human mind' (Cunliffe, 2011: 649).

The objectivist and subjectivist perspectives associate respectively with positivism and interpretivism (Flick, 2014). Positivism asserts that knowledge should be free of bias and that anything which exists can be scientifically verified (Park et al., 2020). Scientific (i.e.

positivistic) approaches have been criticised for being unable to answer every question; the laws of science alone may likely fail to, for instance, answer certain queries about religion and faith or explain comprehensively the reasons for people's different preferences in art and aesthetics (Denscombe, 2002: 16, cited in Nudzor, 2009: 117). Positivism is thus somewhat limited in its ability to reflect and explore the complexities and individualities of key aspects relating to human beliefs, behaviours and relationships.

Interpretivism emerged as a critique of positivism and holds that knowledge and meaning are relative; one's 'truth' is shaped by their beliefs and experiences, hence different social realities exist across different people, contexts and moments in time (Ryan, 2018: 17; Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020: 41). Because interpretivism recognises the subjective and dynamic ways in which people interpret and generate their social reality, it is well suited to exploring complex, contested and context-dependent social phenomena. Both vulnerability and policing are examples of such phenomena. As Chapter Two explored, vulnerability is a socially constructed concept that means 'different things to different people' (Gilson, 2024: 263), and in policing, officers' interpretations of the social world and the people within it are shaped by their occupational experiences and cultures (Skolnick, 1966; Reiner, 2010). This study thus assumed an interpretivist perspective because it enabled a focus on the distinct understandings and experiences of individual officers.

4.2.1. Exploratory case study approach

This study adopted an exploratory approach, defined by Vogt (1999: 105) as 'a broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking… leading to description and understanding of an area of social or psychological life'. Rather than controlling variables and interrogating hypotheses – processes traditionally preferred in conventional scientific methods – an exploratory approach allows 'ideas [to] emerge from data' and is designed to be carried out with flexibility and open-mindedness (Stebbins, 2001: 6-9). This design suited this study because the research objectives were investigative, seeking to gain a greater insight into, and understanding of, vulnerability as a focus in neighbourhood policing. Indeed, rather than beginning with a theory or hypothesis, the study started with a set of broad open questions inspired through a review of the existing literature. The purpose of the research was, put simply, to explore these questions.

A qualitative design was chosen to complement the exploratory approach (Goldkuhl, 2012: 135). Mason (2002: 1) suggests that qualitative research allows researchers to explore 'the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social

processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings they generate'. Akin to exploratory research, qualitative research focuses upon the 'making' of meaning through the ways that researchers understand and relay their data and how readers interpret those accounts (Krauss, 2005: 763; Richardson and St Pierre, 2005: 959-60). The voice of the researcher is therefore a 'major ingredient' in the production of qualitative research (Holliday, 2007: 122). The idea that a researcher's personal influence is an essential part of qualitative research aligns with an interpretivist perspective which, as discussed above, positions one's social reality as shaped and constructed through their personal interpretations and worldviews. How this design choice informed the data collection and analysis processes is considered in Section 4.4.. While it was most suited to the study's objectives, it is not without its shortcomings, as Section 4.6.2. examines.

This research adopted a case study design, used by researchers to meticulously examine an 'instance, incident or unit of something' (Schwandt and Gates, 2018: 341). This technique facilitates investigations into the elements or attributes that underpin and inform social life, most often in the context of organisations and communities (Hamel et al., 1993: 2; Clark et al., 2021: 11). Specifically, the research enlisted a descriptive case study design which seeks to create a detailed picture of the meaning and functioning of a given phenomenon in a specific real-life setting (Yin, 2003: 13). It was thus ideal for investigating vulnerability as a focus in neighbourhood policing and aligned well with the study's exploratory objectives and qualitative approach. Moreover, by focusing on a small number of case study sites, outlined in Section 4.3.2., the case study design corresponded with the tendency of interpretivist research to focus closely upon a narrow sample (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). While the in-depth exploration of a specified subject in a given setting is typical in case study research, this approach is sometimes considered to be informed by ethnographic traditions (Suriyani, 2008: 126). The next section explores how this research's case study approach drew upon elements of ethnographic methods.

4.2.2. Incorporating ethnographic methods

According to Creswell (1998: 246), ethnographies regard the study of 'a cultural or social group… based primarily on observations and a prolonged period of time with various degrees of immersion in activities, events, rituals and settings of the cultural group'. Fundamentally, ethnographic research prioritises detail over range, exploring specific aspects of human life within a single case or a very small number of cases through a holistic and relativistic lens (Zaharlick, 1992; Flick, 2014). Marks (2004: 870) observes how ethnographers are required

to ‘immerse themselves in a host society in order to try, as far as possible, to see, feel and even act as members of that “society”’. Goldkuhl (2012: 139) posits that the immersive approach is common in interpretivist research because researchers working closely to the practice field may find themselves better placed to make informed interpretations of the aspects and dynamics existing within that field.

Ethnographic methods were originally developed within the field of anthropology in the early 20th century and adapted through the work of Chicago University urban sociologists. Ethnography became a principal method of policing research in the 1960s and 1970s (see Banton, 1964; Skolnick, 1966; Rubenstein, 1973; Holdaway, 1979). Since these early studies, police scholars have pursued and advocated for better understandings of police institutions that situate them within their social context. Marks (2004: 866) suggests that researchers’ immersion in the policing environment allows them to gain the knowledge required to access and explain police cultures and workings. Accordingly, Punch (2005: 150) calls for more policing ethnographies to be conducted so that we can learn ‘what is happening at the “sharp end”’.

Ethnographic research and case study research are similar in how they both focus on the in-depth investigation of contextually situated subjects and involve the researcher’s voice as a key element of the research (Holliday, 2007; Suryani, 2008). Yet subtle variations in their objectives, scope and role of the researcher expose their distinctions. These differences reveal why a case study incorporating ethnographic methods, rather than an ethnography *per se*, was the most appropriate method in this research. The following explains the basis for this decision.

The research aim was to explore a single phenomenon, namely vulnerability, in the neighbourhood policing setting. The aim was not to undertake a long-term and immersive investigation of the multitude dynamics, processes, cultures, relationships and norms in neighbourhood policing, else a pure ethnographic approach would have been more apt. Having said this, some immersion in the research environment was necessary to allow me to fulfil the study’s exploratory objectives of observing, accessing and understanding the participants’ views, experiences and actions. However, the need to achieve an appropriate degree of immersion was balanced with an effort to keep some distance between myself and the research environment in the interests of collecting more valid and reliable data (4.6.2.). Adopting an in-depth case study approach best enabled me to balance these objectives.

The degree of depth required in ethnographic research means that such work tends to be confined to a very small aspect or area (Suryani, 2008). In this study, research was conducted across three case study sites. While focusing on one site might have provided me with richer data for that single location, the findings would have been less generalisable. The chosen

approach was thus selected upon the decision to prioritise securing a slightly broader account and more widely informed conclusions. Moreover, in the pursuit of such rich data, ethnographic work traditionally relies upon data collected over a substantial period, sometimes involving years of research. Such scope was not possible for this thesis. Meanwhile a case study design, with its relatively defined parameters, was more realistic and still conducive to achieving the research aim.

This section outlined and justified the research paradigm and methodological approaches selected in this study. The next section presents the research context, introducing the force with which the study was partnered and case study sites in which the research was conducted.

4.3. The research partner and place: South Yorkshire Police and the case study sites

The research context is paramount in interpretivist work because knowledge is seen as contextually situated. This means that how something is known, or rather interpreted, is shaped by the setting in which that thing exists, and the position and characteristics of the person doing the knowing (or interpreting) of that thing (Greenhalgh and Manzano, 2022). Accordingly, it is necessary to understand research context as 'not unwelcome noise… but an integral part of the programme' (Pawson, 2013: 36). This section therefore outlines the setting of the research to provide the necessary context upon which to ground and interpret the study's findings. It outlines details of the research partner, SYP, in terms of the force's workforce, districts, histories and legacies and current standing according to the latest HMICFRS's (2025) police efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy (PEEL) assessment.[20] The section then sets out the study's three case study sites and the process that informed their selection.

4.3.1. South Yorkshire Police

As a result of the Local Government Act of 1972, SYP was formed in 1974 by merging the Sheffield and Rotherham Constabulary and the Doncaster Borough Police, along with parts of the West Yorkshire Constabulary and the Nottinghamshire Constabulary. It is the 16th largest of the 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales. As of 31st March 2025, SYP employed 3,026 of the 146,442 full-time equivalent police officers working nationally. Within these

[20] The PEEL inspections assess individual forces' performance under the pillars of efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy. They are conducted every two years within all 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales.

figures, SYP employed 277 neighbourhood officers and 313 PCSOs. This marked a 16.4% decrease in the force's neighbourhood policing workforce compared to the previous year. This trajectory echoed national trends, with most forces in England and Wales (28 of 43) experiencing reductions in their neighbourhood policing workforces over this period (Home Office, 2025b).

4.3.1.1. The county of South Yorkshire

SYP are responsible for policing South Yorkshire, which spans roughly 559 square miles. The county comprises both rural and urban areas and is home to approximately 1,375,000 people (ONS, 2021). The county is made up of four districts, details of which are provided in Table 4.1.. The table draws upon figures from the 2021 census (ONS, 2021) and Crime Rate (2025), a website that analyses data to establish crime trends in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Table 4.1.: South Yorkshire's districts in terms of population, classification, size and crime rate

District	Population	Classification	Area size	Crime rate, per 1000 people
Sheffield	556,500	Core city[21]	142 sq. miles	83
Doncaster	308,100	City	219 sq. miles	134
Rotherham	265,800	Major town	110, sq. miles	102
Barnsley	244,600	Major town	127 sq. miles	95

According to ONS data (2025), of the 5,309,536 crimes recorded by police across England and Wales for the year ending March 2025, 149,532 took place in South Yorkshire. This number comprised just over a quarter (26.5%) of all crimes that happened in the wider Yorkshire and the Humber region. In terms of crime rate per 1,000 people, the national level was 87.2. In Yorkshire and the Humber, it was 100.9. In South Yorkshire it was 106.3. This figure, compared to all 43 territorial police force areas, ranked the crime rate per 1000 people in South Yorkshire as fifth highest. The most common crime types in South Yorkshire mirrored national trends with crimes of violence against the person constituting the majority; of South Yorkshire's total reported crime rate, over one third – 52,657 in total – were of this type.[22] The

[21] 'Core Cities' is a category used to describe 'the local authorities of England's eight largest city economies outside London' (ONS, 2015).
[22] 'Violence against the person' crimes include homicide, violence with and without injury, death or serious injury through unlawful driving and stalking and harassment (ONS, 2025).

other most common crimes were theft offences (47,992), criminal damage and arson (14,731) and public order offences (13,651) (ONS, 2025).

4.3.1.2. Histories, legacies and ongoing investigations

Since its conception just over 50 years ago, SYP has received a significant amount of public, media and political attention. A proportion of this attention has been negative, stemming from the force's involvement in and handling of high-profile incidents. This section outlines three of the most high-profile and impactful of these. Given that these events continue to shape the regional policing landscape, they provide relevant insight to the research context.

One event attached firmly to the reputation of SYP is the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, in which crowds of football supporters were crushed at a FA Cup game, resulting in 97 deaths and 766 injuries. Lord Justice Taylor (1989: 49), who delivered the Hillsborough Stadium Disaster Inquiry report, determined that 'policing on 15 April broke down' and identified that 'the main reason for the disaster was the failure of police control'. In 2016, a jury ruled that the deaths constituted unlawful killings, caused not by the fans' behaviour (as police officials had previously claimed) but by police errors, including those made by the match commander, Chief Superintendent David Duckenfield (Cooper and Lapsley, 2019: 9–10). Due to breaching his duty of care, Duckenfield was prosecuted for gross negligence manslaughter in 2016 (BBC News, 2017). However, three years later at a criminal trial, he was found not guilty (BBC News, 2019b). In 2021, the cases against solicitor Peter Metcalf and retired police officers Donald Denton and Alan Foster, all of whom had been accused of editing the accounts of some SYP officers working on the day of the disaster, collapsed on a technicality (BBC News, 2021).

In 2025, the Independent Office for Police Conduct completed its 12-year investigation into the Hillsborough event. It concluded that despite some senior officers having committed gross misconduct in the aftermath of the match through attempts to 'deflect the blame from themselves', no further disciplinary action would be taken against them because they were all now retired (BBC News, 2025). This sparked much outrage among the victims' families and the public (Conn and Boyd, 2025). Now over three decades later, the Hillsborough tragedy continues to affect public confidence in SYP who still grapple with its legacy (Cooper and Lapsley, 2019).

Five years before the Hillsborough disaster, the 1984 'Battle of Orgreave' took place. It occurred during national miner strikes and involved a violent confrontation between local miners and SYP officers at the Orgreave coking plant near Rotherham. The event and its aftermath were marked by allegations of excessive police force, police brutality, fabricated

evidence and wrongful arrests (Conn, 2025). The police were accused of a premeditated, coordinated plan to provoke and attack the miners, resulting in 95 miners being arrested under charges of rioting, threatening behaviour and unlawful assembly (Taylor-Ward, 2016). The charges were later dropped due to uncredible evidence. Despite widespread demands for accountability and justice, no disciplinary action has yet been brought against any officer involved in the event, for either the alleged assaults on miners or the accusations of fabricated evidence. 42 years on, however, an inquiry into the confrontation at Orgreave was announced last year by the previous Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper. She said 'Every community should have confidence in their police, but we know what happened at Orgreave cast a shadow over communities in Yorkshire and other mining areas' (Home Office and Cooper, 2025). As Cooper's words relay, the 'Battle of Orgreave's' legacy continues to influence the relationship and trust between the public and police in South Yorkshire (Conn, 2025).

Among the most reputationally damaging events in SYP's history is the child sexual exploitation (CSE) that took place in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013. Involved were approximately 1,400 child victims assaulted and abused by large numbers of male perpetrators, many of whom belonged to 'grooming gangs' (Heal and Gladman, 2017). The Jay Report (2014) was commissioned to investigate how local child services and law enforcement handled the CSE cases during the 16-year period. Alexis Jay OBE, who authored the report, criticised the police, social services and other local authorities for ignoring the issue, failing to protect the victims and compounding the harm through lies, deception and attempts to conceal dubious investigations. Jay (2014: 1) concluded that 'at an operational level, the Police gave no priority to CSE, regarding many child victims with contempt and failing to act on their abuse as a crime'. A subsequent review concurred that the police's handling of the reports of abuse had been inadequate, though it did find that SYP's approach to safeguarding had improved in the years since (Drew, 2016).

After the Jay Report, the National Crime Agency initiated Operation Stovewood, an investigation designed to identify and support the victims of the CSE, bring the offenders to justice and restore public confidence in the police and other local agencies. So far, this ongoing operation has identified approximately 1,150 of the victims and initiated a wave of charges against men responsible for committing the offences in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013 (NCA, undated; CPS, 2024; 2025). As of February 2026, 50 people have been convicted for crimes being investigated by Operation Stovewood (NCA, 2025).

SYP's relationship with the public and the levels of public trust and confidence in the force have undoubtedly been shaped by past events and their legacies. Recent developments within ongoing investigations demonstrate how the implications of such events continue to unfold. It

is impossible to know exactly how these developments will evolve or how they will impact policing in South Yorkshire in the future. In the meantime, the PEEL inspections provide a useful insight into the contemporary state of SYP, as the next section discusses.

4.3.1.3. The current state of South Yorkshire Police

Between 2023 and 2025, the HMICFRS's (2025) PEEL assessment graded SYP in eight areas of policing, each of which it ranked on a five-point scale.[23] The areas of 'investigating crime' and 'developing a positive workplace' were ranked as requiring improvement. SYP's 'prevention of crime' was marked as good. All other areas were marked as adequate, namely 'police powers and public treatment', 'responding to the public', 'protecting vulnerable people', 'managing offenders' and 'leadership and force management'.

The assessment (HMICFRS, 2025: 16) revealed that SYP's neighbourhood policing model was successfully focused on preventing crime, antisocial behaviour and vulnerability. It (2025: 2) identified how 'the force is committed to neighbourhood policing and is continuing to invest in its neighbourhood policing model. It has developed a range of initiatives designed to provide early intervention and to prevent and deter crime'. This finding supported those of a peer review conducted by Inspector Yvette Hammill (2021: 3–4) of West Yorkshire Police, which concluded that neighbourhood policing had 'become part of [SYP's] core policing offer and is considered business as usual'. Hammill's report (2021: 5–6) also found 'evidence of problem-solving work in partnership' within neighbourhood policing in SYP. Similarly, the recent PEEL inspection (2025: 17) identified how SYP had attained and demonstrated an understanding and long-term commitment to problem-solving. The HMICFRS report (2025: 39; 41) also found that SYP had 'a strategy, performance framework and governance structure in place for vulnerability', worked well with partner agencies to safeguard vulnerable people and trained its officers effectively in dealing with vulnerability.

While the PEEL report (2025: 2) praised SYP for its practices in 'keeping people safe', 'reducing crime' and 'providing an effective service to victims', the force ranked less highly than it had done previously. In 2023, SYP was one of only three forces nationally ranked outstanding for 'protecting vulnerable people', a grade it also received for its 'prevention of crime' and 'use of resources' (HMICFRS, 2023). The 2023 assessment rated SYP good at 'recording reported data about crime', 'investigating crime', 'treatment of the public', 'management of offenders' and 'developing a positive workplace'. The only area marked adequate was 'responding to the public'. As of 2023, the force's approach to neighbourhood

[23] The scale's categories are outstanding, good, adequate, requires improvement and inadequate.

policing and problem-solving was deemed 'highly effective' and it was found to have 'a good understanding of its communities through its neighbourhood profiles' (HMICFRS, 2023: 2, 12). Speaking recently, the county's Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime, Kilvinder Vigurs, has expressed that the force remains committed to 'continuous improvement and ensur[ing] the safety of [their] communities' (SY MCA, 2025). Her response laid out a pledge to closely monitor and scrutinise the force's performance in pursuit of meaningful progress.

4.3.2. The case study sites: the selection process and area details

The study enlisted three case sites across three South Yorkshire districts. These were identified in collaboration with the gatekeeper, whose policing experience and professional networks in South Yorkshire enabled them to advise on areas suited to the study's aims. Their recommendations were initially guided by their knowledge of the areas having dedicated NPTs with clearly defined priorities centred on particular vulnerable groups or vulnerability-related issues (Table 4.2.). The sites were therefore selected as relevant contexts in which vulnerability-focused policing formed a prominent feature of local practice.

At the outset, these area-specific priorities were expected to provide the main focus of the research. However, once fieldwork began, it quickly became clear to me that a more expansive approach would generate richer insight. I therefore moved away from focusing narrowly on the specific groups or issues prioritised in each site and instead explored officers' understandings and practices concerning vulnerability more broadly. This avoided delimiting the research around predefined categories and enabled a more comprehensive account of how vulnerability was interpreted and operationalised by officers. The original priority areas nevertheless remained valuable, for they provided initial points of access and focus, shaped early lines of enquiry and continued to offer useful reference points in the data presentation and analysis.

This section provides an overview of each site to enable the data collected from them to be understood in context. A summary of these details is presented in Table 4.2.. The data included below are extracted from the 2021 census and were attained using the ONS' 'profile builder'.[24] The data on the rates and types of crime were gathered using the area search function on SYP's website.[25] The crime figures presented cover the period of January 2023 to December 2023. Statistics from this period are provided because it includes the eight-month timeframe in which

[24] The ONS 'profile builder' is available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/customprofiles/ (accessed 10/11/25).
[25] Data on crime in South Yorkshire are available at: https://www.southyorkshire.police.uk/area/yourarea/ (accessed 10/11/25).

the data were collected. The descriptions below are deliberately broad and the sites' names are pseudonyms, the reasons for which are explained in Section 4.5.2..

4.3.2.1. Whitechurch

Covering an area of 1.4 square miles, Whitechurch is a busy city centre made up primarily of commercial premises and public spaces. The city centre is home to approximately 25,400 individuals and 6,500 households. The low number of residential properties, relative to the area's population, is informed by the area's higher education facilities and associated student population, most of whom reside in the city on a short-term basis while studying; 61.6% of Whitechurch residents are students, compared to a national average of 7.7%. This student population also shapes the area's age demographic: 40.5% are aged between 20 and 24, whereas this age group makes up only 6% of the wider public nationally.

Whitechurch is an ethnically diverse area. 54.1% of residents are white, compared to 81% nationally. 26.4% are Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh, compared to 9.6% nationally. 7.8% are Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African, compared to 4.2% nationally and the remaining 11.5% belong to mixed, multiple or other ethnic groups, compared to 5.2% nationally. 9,404 crimes were reported in Whitechurch in the year ending December 2023. Reflecting regional and national trends, violence and sexual offences were the most common type of crime, followed by public order offences and antisocial behaviour.

The vulnerability-related focus for neighbourhood policing in Whitechurch was homelessness, 'rough sleeping' and, to borrow a police term picked up during the fieldwork, the 'street cohort'.[26] At the time of the research, the neighbourhood policing priorities in Whitechurch involved reducing the number of people sleeping on the streets and tackling antisocial behaviour carried out by the 'street cohort', such as public drinking and drug taking.

[26] The term 'street cohort' refers to the street-based population encountered by officers, including people who are homeless, rough sleeping or otherwise spend significant time in public spaces. Officers in this study expressed a preference for this term over those 'experiencing homelessness' or 'rough sleeping' because these latter groups imply a formal housing status, usually referring to people without settled accommodation or moving between forms of temporary accommodation. By contrast, 'street cohort' does not classify individuals primarily by their housing status, but by their regular presence in street-based settings. The term 'street cohort' was thus described by officers as more useful because it was more expansive.

4.3.2.2. Ashgrove

Ashgrove is a multi-ethnic urban area located at the edge of a market town. It is made up primarily of residential streets, alongside some parks, shops and educational facilities. The area is 1.1 square miles and home to 14,100 residents and 9,200 households. Of these homes, 33.1% are socially rented, almost double the national level (17.1%). Household deprivation in Ashgrove is above average: 61% are deprived in one or two dimensions, compared to 47.7% nationally.

2,124 crimes were reported in Ashgrove between January and December 2023. Of these, violent and sexual offences constituted the majority, followed by antisocial behaviour. The other most common crimes varied month to month, fluctuating between public order offences, theft offences and criminal damage and arson.

Ashgrove's population is relatively ethnically diverse. People of Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh ethnicity make up 21.4% of Ashgrove's population, 3.4% are Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African and 2.7% belong to Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups. Members of other ethnic groups constitute 5.9% of the population, compared to the national level of 2.2%. 66.5% of the population are white, compared to 81% nationally. 74.8% of Ashgrove residents are born in the UK, compared to 82.6% of the wider nation. 85.5% of Ashgrove's population have English as a main language, 5.3% less than the national average (90.8%) and 3.6% of residents cannot speak English well, more than twice that of the national rate (1.6%). Compared to the 0.3% of the national population that cannot speak English at all, this is the case for 0.6% of Ashgrove residents.

Local policing priorities at the time of the study included improving relations and communication between the police and ethnically minoritised groups living in Ashgrove. There was an emphasis on building trust in the police among people who had themselves or whose family had come from places with more authoritarian or totalitarian policing systems and who thus may have felt more fearful of and negative towards police institutions. Neighbourhood policing priorities in Ashgrove also included managing tensions between neighbouring communities and their different cultures.

4.3.2.3. Brookwood

Once an old mining town, Brookwood is now a mostly residential area with some shops, schools and green areas. It is located several miles from a large town centre, spans an area of 2.4 square miles and is home to 8,400 residents and 3,900 households. The area is relatively

non-diverse: compared to the national white population of 81%, in Brookwood 96.1% of residents are white. Only 11.3% of Brookwood's population were born outside the UK, compared to the national 17.4%. Household deprivation in Brookwood sits above the national average: 56.1% are deprived in one or two dimensions, compared to 47.7% nationally.

Between January and December 2023, 1,284 crimes were recorded in Brookwood. Echoing statistics across the county and country, violence and sexual offences were the most common type, followed by antisocial behaviour and subsequently criminal damage and arson.

Leading neighbourhood policing concerns in Brookwood during the research regarded antisocial behaviour being carried out by young people, such as the dangerous driving of quad bikes and motorbikes in the area. Further concerns were county lines offences and the exploitation by organised crime groups of vulnerable young people.

Table 4.2.: Description of case study sites.

Case study site	Area description	Area size	Population	Vulnerability-related priority	Crimes reported (Jan – Dec 2023)
Whitechurch	Busy city centre made up of primarily public spaces and commercial premises.	1.4 miles sq.	25,400	Homelessness, 'rough sleeping' and the 'street cohort'	9,404
Ashgrove	Multi-ethnic, urban residential area located at the edge of a town centre.	1.1 miles sq.	14,100	Ethnically minoritised communities	2,124
Brookwood	Old mining town, now a residential area located a few miles from a town centre.	2.4 miles sq.	8,400	Child criminal exploitation and youth ASB.	1,284

This section provided background to the research by introducing the research partner and the case study sites, designed to help the study's empirical data and conclusions be situated in context. The next section presents the methods used to collect the data.

4.4. The research methods: data collection and data analysis

This section is split into two parts to reflect the discrete data collection and analysis stages. It outlines the methods used for each and the rationale for their selection. It also provides information about the sample and the strategies through which the participants were recruited.

4.4.1. Data collection

This study collected two qualitative data types. First, observational data were gathered from a range of settings, including public streets and premises, private homes, police stations and custody suites, to examine officers' behaviours and interactions across different contexts (Manning, 2014: 522). Second, in-person semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore officers' perceptions and understandings. These methods were selected as the most conducive to the research aim while also accommodating the practical realities of police work and the constraints of a doctoral thesis.

4.4.1.1. Observations

202 hours of observations were carried out between January 2023 and August 2023. These hours were not evenly split across the sites (Table 4.3.). The disparity was due to differences in observational opportunities between the areas and the varying shift patterns and availability of officers whom I worked alongside. In Whitechurch, for instance, high rates of crime and antisocial behaviour combined with the fact that multiple NPTs work within the city created more opportunity to collect data, hence more hours were spent there. Meanwhile, I spent less time in Brookwood because the NPT consisted of fewer officers responsible for a relatively small community.

Visits to the sites happened regularly. Sometimes there was up to a week between visits to the same site. Other times, observations took place within the same site on two or three consecutive days. Keeping the visits regular helped me build and sustain positive relationships with the participants, keep up with events and follow developments in ongoing matters. The observations took place across different times of day, starting as early as 6am and finishing as late as 11pm. Whether an NPT was single, double or triple crewed depended on the task at hand and availability of officers. I spent a relatively even amount of time with different crew sizes.

Table 4.3.: Number of hours spent observing at each case study site and the times of day and frequency of visits

Case study site	Hours spent observing	Observations between 06.00 and 14.00	Observations between 14.00 and 23.00	Total number of visits
Whitechurch	73	15	9	24
Ashgrove	66	7	13	20
Brookwood	63	7	8	15
Total	202	29	30	59

Before collecting the data, a list of prompts was developed for use during the observations. The original prompts were based on themes elicited from early literature reviews and the research aim and questions. At first instance, the prompts included, for example, 'Body language', 'Quotes', 'Partnership work' and 'Questions'. They were drafted loosely deliberately to strike a balance between focusing my attention, allowing all data to be assigned to a theme and affording the space for reflexive development as the fieldwork progressed (Cain, 1973). Indeed, as time went on, the list was extended to incorporate themes that emerged during the research such as 'Partnership work challenges' and 'Tensions in policing responses to vulnerability'.

Approaches to recording the fieldnotes also evolved during the research. I had planned to document the data in a notebook. However, I soon became aware of how the overtness of me writing notes in front of participants may encourage them to feel uncomfortable, increasing the risk of them altering their behaviour and affecting the data's validity. The notebook was therefore only used when these risks were considered minimal, which mostly comprised moments I was alone. Aside from during these rare occasions, the 'notes' app on my phone quickly became my primary means of data documentation since typing on my phone felt more subtle than handwriting notes.

While the 'notes' app did assist in the recording of data, substantive physical notetaking of any variety was not consistently carried out during the observations themselves. One reason for this relates to the point above: I was cognisant of how others might perceive my writing or typing in front of them and the risks of it influencing behaviours or feelings towards me. Another reason concerned the importance of me being present, alert and aware of my environment. This not only meant that I was less likely to miss things than if I had been caught up in notetaking, but it was also critical because a lot of police work by nature involves risk and unpredictability (Skolnick, 1966). Hence, ensuring that I was focused on my surroundings, rather than notetaking, was necessary to keep myself as safe as possible. These considerations meant that data that were recorded when conducting observations out in the field most often

took the form of 'mental note[taking]' (Lofland et al., 2006: 109) and, when I had a chance to write or type something, 'cryptic jotting' (Berg and Lune, 2012: 231). More detailed notes were then scribed once time allowed. Sometimes this opportunity arose quickly, for example whilst in the back of a police vehicle or at the police station during a 'down-time' period. Other times, this task was carried out on the train home after a visit.

The fieldnotes collected during or just after visits were formally recorded in a table on Microsoft Word. The notes were transferred to this table as soon as I returned home from a visit so that its details were fresh in my mind. The table comprised a series of columns with the following headings: 'Location visited', 'Date and time (start and end) of visit', 'Officers accompanied', 'Description of events and activities', 'Thoughts and reflections', 'Emerging themes', 'Quotes' and 'Questions'.[27] I used this table to systematically file the data and record detailed accounts and descriptions, supporting the development of a rich dataset. This is especially important to exploratory qualitative research because such work draws its findings from its data, hence detail is instrumental to its quality (4.2.).

The observations took place in an array of environments. Much time was spent outside the police station when, for example, officers carried out their routine neighbourhood policing duties such as foot and car patrols and engaging with community members. Most often these duties were carried out as day-to-day responsibilities, but occasionally I observed officers attending scheduled events in their local area, including village fetes, sports matches, community gatherings and school presentations.

A lot of time outside of the police station was also dedicated to retrospective work as officers worked through investigative enquiry duties and jobs listed on the ever-updating 'task queue'. The 'task-queue' jobs typically called upon officers to conduct home visits for reasons including issuing verbal cautions, inviting people for interviews and checking in on victims and known vulnerable individuals. Visits were also made to shops, businesses and schools for officers to investigate concerns and complaints registered on the 'task-queue'. Several police warrant raids were also observed, most of which related to matters of immigration, drugs, firearms and stolen goods. Time outside the station also involved visits to local custody facilities and the transportation of prisoners.

The remaining observation hours were spent inside the station. This time was largely filled with officers completing paperwork, writing and submitting case forms to send to the Crown Prosecution Service, filing reports to custody and checking and updating the 'task-queue'. I

[27] As no recording device was used during the observations and the notes were often made quickly or from memory, it is impossible to guarantee word-for-word precision of officers' quotes included in this thesis. Nonetheless, much effort was made and, where possible, prompts were noted to help me remember and transcribe officers' words with accuracy.

also observed some team briefings, as well as officers organising and conducting interviews with suspects, witnesses and victims. Many informal conversations between myself and officers took place during any 'downtime' in the station.

In total, I accompanied 26 neighbourhood officers during the observations. This sample was attained through various phases. In the early stages, my main contacts were the NPT sergeants, to whom the gatekeeper had introduced me once the case study sites had been decided. The sergeants would let me know their team's working hours and which shifts would be convenient for me to observe. At the beginning therefore, a convenience sampling method was adopted because the participants depended on who was working when I was there.

As time progressed, the sampling approach became increasingly purposive as I met more officers and as more people became familiar with my research. Existing contacts often introduced me to colleagues they believed would be valuable participants, typically explaining that their recommendations were based on these individuals' policing experience. Within a few weeks of beginning observations, I had established several key contacts who remained central throughout the research process. These officers regularly informed me of their working hours, alerted me to upcoming events and invited me to accompany them on shifts.

Whilst this sample size may have had negative implications for the generalisability of the findings (4.6.2.), spending the most time with only a few participants contributed to the development of deeper understandings and relationships and likely encouraged these individuals to feel more comfortable in my presence. Ericson (1982: 50) found in his research that it was only through spending many hours with officers did they become 'open'. Indeed, I generally found that the longer I spent with a participant, the more candid conversations seemed to be.

4.4.1.2. Interviews

Twenty-two interviews with neighbourhood officers were completed between April 2023 and June 2023. These were semi-structured in design, defined as a 'guided conversation' that seeks to extract 'rich, detailed materials' to investigate an individual's experiences and thoughts around a given subject or situation (Lofland and Lofland, 1984: 12). This method's means and aims are highly compatible with qualitative and interpretivist research (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 10). The fact that '[t]he focus of interview research is (mostly) the individual experience of the participant' situated this method as conducive to the study's objective of exploring neighbourhood officers' perceptions (Flick, 2018: 98).

Semi-structured interviews involve the researcher asking open questions in a flexible way rather than relying on 'a standardized script' (Remler and Van Ryzin, 2022: 73). A flexible interview approach allows participants to share their experiences and thoughts in their own words (Crowther and Lancaster, 2012: 145). This is worthwhile in policing research because, as Fletcher (1996: 36) suggests, 'police organizations are filled with storytellers… Storytelling is an essential part of an officer's equipment'. Moreover, providing space for officers to tell their 'stories' in their own way likely encouraged richer responses than may have otherwise been secured through more tightly structured questioning.

While it was necessary to facilitate some flexibility, it was equally important to deliver a broadly consistent approach to interviewing to support the methodological rigor of the research (Remler and van Ryzin, 2022: 73). Flick (2018: 77) notes this as important when conducting research across different groups or places, as was the case here. Similarly, Powell and Brubacher (2020: 647) reiterate how keeping to a general format allows for 'more standardised service delivery' that helps reduce the risks of researcher bias impacting the process.

A broad schedule was used to guide interview practice that balanced an appropriate level of both flexibility and consistency (Appendix A). The schedule consisted of eleven questions, all of which were open and some of which were accompanied by sub-questions. Every interview began with me asking the same question: 'Can you tell me about your role within neighbourhood policing and how the idea of vulnerability informs your day-to-day work?'. After this initial question, the semi-structured format meant that the degree to which the schedule was followed depended upon participants' responses. In the majority, all eleven questions were asked, largely with the same wording and in the same order as drafted in the interview schedule. Occasionally, the interview process departed from the schedule. This occurred when officers jumped between topics, shared stories and/or discussed one subject in-depth. Sometimes in response to the details shared by participants, I would ask questions not written on the schedule. The duration of the interviews also varied. The shortest was about 45 minutes, while others lasted just over two hours. Regardless of length and any tangential discussions, the schedule ensured that all interviews both were steered towards 'substantially the same topics' (Remler and van Ryzin, 2022: 73) and remained on task and relevant to the research.

Table 4.4. presents the interviewee sample in terms of the officers' ranks and areas in which they worked. Efforts were made to attain a relatively even sample across rank and area to strengthen the findings' validity and reliability. As Rubin and Rubin (2012: 71–76) note, interviewing a range of participants who can provide multiple perspectives can broaden the scope of the research. Moreover, the sample had to be substantial enough to allow for common

themes across the interviews to emerge. These factors were balanced with what was reasonable within the boundaries of this thesis. The result was 22 interviews taking place. All were recorded on a Dictaphone and conducted in person.

Table 4.4.: Number of interviewees across rank and case study sites

	Rank				
Case study site	**Chief Inspector/ Inspector**	**Sergeant**	**Constable**	**PCSO**	**Interviews per site**
Whitechurch	1	2	4	1	8
Ashgrove	1	1	3	2	7
Brookwood	1	1	1	1	4
SYP HQ	2	1	0	0	3
Total	**5**	**5**	**8**	**4**	**22**

The interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling, comprising a method of 'chain referral' whereby connections are made 'within a circle of people who know each other' (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981: 151). Though this approach technically limits the reach to that of a contact's network, the typical close-knit culture within policing organisations made this sampling method sufficiently extensive and effective for this study's purpose (O'Reilly, 2009: 196-8). Indeed, officers' familiarity with their colleagues meant that existing contacts often passed on to me names and details of other people whom they believed could offer helpful contributions to the research. On occasion, I approached officers I deemed well-placed to be interviewed. My noticing the suitability of certain individuals generally occurred in conversations that happened during the observational fieldwork. Whether identified by myself or recommended by someone else, the interviewees were recruited tactically on account of their policing experience and knowledge.

4.4.1.3. Using different methods

While the observations and interviews were designed and conducted discretely, some fusing between the methods occasionally occurred. During the observations, the frequent open dialogue and a sharing of questions and thoughts between the participants and me sometimes

constituted something of an informal interview process.[28] The scope for overlap was compounded by the sequencing of the two methods. Before the interviews commenced I had completed approximately three months of observations. During this period, topics relevant to the not-yet-started interviews were regularly raised and I sometimes found myself informally asking questions akin to those included in the interview schedule. The questions were asked spontaneously, resulting from my curiosity towards a situation and interest in hearing officers' thoughts at the time. Consequently, when it came to interviewing those officers, previously discussed subjects would inevitably arise again. Nonetheless, the interview process remained valuable as it allowed for more in-depth conversations, further questions to be asked and an opportunity to formally record discussion.

I chose to conduct both observations and interviews for several reasons. Firstly, different methods offer access to different things. Interviews and observations are routinely employed alongside one another in social research (Flick, 2018: 100–101). Suryani (2008: 122) notes how these two approaches, when used in conjunction, allow a researcher to access both the internal thoughts and external actions of participants. The value of this, and how these methods correspond with each other, works both ways. In one sense, observations can help to formulate a richer insight than interviews can manage. As Brewer (1991: 18) notes, interviews are useful for attaining 'readily available attitudes, perceptions and opinions… [but] gaining insight into deep-level culture requires a more intensive and continuous engagement with respondents and their environment'. In another sense, interview data can provide context by revealing critical information about the thoughts and beliefs that shape participants' actions (McNeill and Chapman, 2005: 19). Hence, the interview and observation methods aligned with and facilitated this study's aim of exploring both the perceptions and practices of neighbourhood officers.

Furthermore, using both methods offered practical benefits. By spending time with officers during the observations, I was able to build rapport with them which may have made them more willing to participate in interviews (Marks, 2004). Moreover, as Cain (1973) experienced in her research, by engaging with officers in their environment and learning about the policing setting prior to the interviews, researchers may be more equipped for the interview process because they can better contextualise participant responses. This was a worthwhile process for me as an 'outsider' doing research in a policing setting (4.6.1.).

[28] Although some of the conversations I had with officers during the observations followed an interview-like question-and-answer format, these interactions were not considered nor registered as interviews and their details were recorded within the observational fieldnotes.

4.4.2. Data analysis

This study adopted a thematic approach to analysis which involves identifying and analysing patterns or 'themes' across a qualitative dataset, minimally 'organis[ing] and describ[ing]' data to extract meaning from it (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79, 86). The method is designed to both 'reflect reality and… unravel the surface of reality', thereby chiming with the study's exploratory objectives (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 81). Both theoretical and inductive approaches to thematic analysis were enlisted. The former was used to inform the study's initial direction and scope while the latter was applied reflexively during the research. Accordingly, the analysis process took place not just towards the end but throughout the study, across interconnected stages.

According to Creswell and Poth (2006), qualitative analysis comprises preparing, summarising and presenting the data. In this study, exercises of data preparation, and therefore data analysis, occurred from the outset. The first step involved consulting the literature to develop a provisional list of themes based on key topics, questions and knowledge gaps within the research field (Miles and Huberman, 1994). These themes then informed the research aim, questions and design. Subsequently, by drawing upon the themes, aim and questions, coding systems were developed to determine the subjects to be included in and explored through the observational prompts and interview schedule (Schmidt, 2004: 255). This thematic approach meant that by the final analysis stage, as detailed below, the data were roughly grouped, or at least predisposed to being grouped, under a subject area.

The final stage of analysis took place once data collection had concluded. This involved transcribing the interviews, reviewing the observational fieldnotes and repeatedly examining both datasets to develop a close familiarity with their content. From this process, I identified prominent themes and coded the data accordingly. These themes formed the final analytical categories through which the findings are presented (Attride-Sterling, 2001: 387–8). Although the themes were grounded in the data, they were inevitably shaped by the literature, the research aims and questions and the provisional codes developed during fieldwork. In addition, a degree of analysis occurred during data collection itself for reflexive purposes. This reflexive approach, characteristic of qualitative research, enabled emerging ideas, recurring patterns, and early thematic insights to inform the ongoing research process (Remler and Van Ryzin, 2022: 85).

The findings chapters (Five–Eight) draw upon both interview and observational data, which are presented in distinct formats. Interview quotations are presented in standard text, while extracts from observational fieldnotes are italicised. This convention is designed to reflect the different character of the two datasets and to allow the reader to distinguish between

participants' accounts provided during interviews and the researcher's fieldnote-based accounts of observed practices, interactions and events.

4.5. Research ethics

Prior to beginning the empirical work, ethical approval for the research was attained from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds (Appendix B). As there is no official universal principle specifying precisely what ethical research looks like (Crowther and Lancaster, 2012: 143), ethical standards were upheld in this study by consulting and adhering to the University's guidance and the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice (BSA, 2017). The requirements in the Economic and Social Research Council's Framework for Research Ethics (ESRC, 2015) were also followed as this body funded the research. Among the general conditions of ethical research stipulated within these sources, a few warrant particular attention in the present study. The following outlines these, exploring how they influenced the study and the steps taken to ensure that the research was ethically sound.

4.5.1. Briefing participants: obtaining informed consent

Because this research explored officers' perceptions and experiences, it carried the risk of prompting participants to reflect on and discuss matters that could be sensitive, difficult or triggering (Urquhart, 2012: 70). Given the aims of the study, these topics could not be avoided, which meant that the data collection process required careful planning and sensitive handling to ensure participants' wellbeing throughout.

Ethical standards were upheld by providing all prospective participants with transparency about the research. This transparency was disclosed through an information sheet which outlined some details of the study and officers' rights regarding participation (Appendix C). The sheet stated that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed for analytical purposes and that all data would be stored on a memory stick and destroyed on the study's completion. Additionally, no participant was involved in the research until they had signed a consent form which reiterated their rights should they have decided to participate (Appendix D). Completed consent forms containing participant details were scanned and saved on the memory stick.

The briefing process was designed to balance providing officers with enough information to make an informed decision about participating without oversupplying details as to the purpose

of the study (BSA, 2017: 5). The risks of oversharing details concerned participant bias; officers' knowledge about the study may have encouraged them to act in inauthentic ways, thereby affecting the validity of the findings. Attempts to manage these risks included not divulging the interview questions to participants before the interview took place to ensure that responses were unrehearsed. This was in the hopes that answers given 'in the moment' would be most genuine. Nonetheless, providing officers with some transparency about the study meant that the potential for participant bias remained but the importance of conducting ethical practice and obtaining informed consent from participants justified taking this risk.

Ethical standards were also upheld by giving all participants an ongoing opportunity to ask questions about the research at any point. Many did so, although queries largely arose out of interest in the research, rather than concerns about participation. Regardless, I took care to reassure participants throughout that there was no obligation to participate and that they had the right to withdraw at any stage, which fortunately none did.

4.5.2. Protecting participant identity

According to ethical guidelines, researchers should, where appropriate and practical, preserve participant anonymity by 'breaking the link between data and identifiable individuals' (BSA, 2017: 7). Protecting participant identity was important in this study for several reasons. First, the ability to obtain rich and valid data depended on officers feeling comfortable in my presence. Had their names been included in the thesis, participants may have been less willing to take part, less at ease during observations and interviews and/or more likely to modify their behaviour. Creating conditions in which officers felt comfortable also increased the likelihood that they would have a positive experience of academic research, an important consideration in the context of wider efforts to strengthen relationships and support collaboration between policing and academic institutions (4.6.1.).

There was also a risk that including personal details in the thesis could have exposed participants to harm, particularly in relation to their occupational position. Given that much police work involves sensitive and confidential activity, it was essential that I did not disclose information that might inadvertently lead to disciplinary consequences. Relatedly, without being able to assure participants that reasonable steps would be taken to protect their privacy, they may have withheld information, perhaps limiting the depth and quality of data collected.

Nonetheless, anonymity could not be guaranteed. The use of a gatekeeper and snowball sampling meant that participants often knew of others involved in the study. This was unavoidable during observational fieldwork, where I frequently accompanied multiple officers

who were, by necessity, aware of each other's participation. The issue was particularly evident when sergeants confirmed their NPT's commitments to facilitate my visits and interviews, meaning they knew which officers I was shadowing on any given day. Furthermore, naming the force and narrowing the study to neighbourhood policing inevitably restricted the sample pool to a defined population. This carried the risk that, even without explicit identifiers, some individuals could speculate about the identity of participants.

Despite the impossibility of guaranteeing anonymity, steps were taken to help protect participant identities. Obviously identifying information was removed from interview transcripts and from the written analysis, including specialised job titles, names, ages and genders. Furthermore, the case study sites and all individuals described in the observational fieldnotes were given pseudonyms, intended to serve as a 'smoke screen' to reduce the possibility of 'jigsaw identification' being carried out (Saunders et al., 2015: 621, 627). Heaton (2022: 127) suggests that pseudonyms enable data to be 'de-identified without being depersonalised' which she suggests is key to qualitative research's ability to 'capture the richness of, and thickly describe participants' lived experiences and social worlds'. In this study, however, removing obviously identifiable features of the case-study sites and providing only broad descriptions (4.3.2.) inevitably introduced a degree of 'de-personalisation'. This was regrettable in some respects, given that neighbourhood policing is a local practice shaped heavily by the characteristics of the areas in which it operates (Chapter Three). Omitting site-specific detail therefore limited the extent of contextual information that could be shared, but protecting participant identities was ultimately prioritised. All participants were informed in advance, via the information sheet (Appendix C), that while reasonable efforts would be made to protect their identity, anonymity could not be assured.

4.5.3. Researching vulnerability

The final ethical consideration concerns the subject of the study itself: researching vulnerability. Ethical guidelines emphasise that 'special care should be taken where research participants are particularly vulnerable' (BSA, 2017: 6). In this study, the vulnerability dimension did not relate to the neighbourhood officers who formed the sample, but to the vulnerable people with whom those officers interacted. Because, in any case, vulnerability was a central focus of the research, it remains necessary to reflect on the ethical implications of studying this subject.

As Chapter Two explored, ideas of vulnerability shaped through notions of risk, deficiency, agency and morality can serve to cast those situated at the social margins as weak, dangerous,

undesirable and problematic. These narratives and their implications can surface not only in the social policy and policing contexts but in research too. Research can objectify vulnerable people by presenting them as the so-called 'Other', framed as a figure who is 'at the least unfamiliar and at the most grossly marginalized' (Lahman, 2008: 286). Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 13) consider how this can lead to researchers treating the subjects of their research as abstract objects to figuratively dissect and 'archive'. These processes reveal the scope for an imbalance of power or, as Johnson et al. (2004: 254) describe, 'positions of domination and subordination' between researchers and the potentially oppressed subjects of research. In essence, research carries risks of, inadvertently or otherwise, compounding problems in how vulnerability is addressed, explored and presented and perpetuating the stigmatisation and othering of people labelled as vulnerable (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012; Lahman, 2008).

Despite the risks of research into vulnerability, terminating such work is not necessarily the solution. Research can be valuable when it is developed and delivered with compassion, in accordance with ethical guidelines and through ways which empower rather than objectify research subjects. For example, research can platform the voices and experiences of marginalised people that may otherwise go unheard or be misrepresented. According to Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012: 299), '[k]nowing the Other is one of the major motivations for doing qualitative research' on the basis that it can 'give a voice to people who were previously ignored or were the object of distorted conceptions'. They (2012: 300) suggest that situating the 'Other' at the 'foreground' of research is critical to mitigating the processes by which certain groups are traditionally ostracised (see also Spiers, 2000).

Another way that research into vulnerability can be valuable regards its ability to bring critical attention to the social conditions that shape and produce vulnerability, such as inequality and marginalisation. In highlighting these social forces, research can help to expose their impact and provide an impetus upon which to address them, thus offering contributions with real-life applicability and value. Specifically, by working to identify the needs of, and gaps in support for, vulnerable people, research can assist in the development of more informed and responsive forms of policy and practice.

This study's exploration of vulnerability is justified ethically on the belief that there is a need to examine how the police interpret and operationalise the concept. Mobilisations of vulnerability in policy and practice carry significant implications for the lives of vulnerable people, not least in the way that practitioner discretion can influence the provision (and withdrawal) of protection, support and justice. As Chapter Two explored, misrecognitions and inconsistent applications of vulnerability, and discrimination against vulnerable people, can reinforce inequalities and create harm through neglect or over-policing. It is therefore crucial

to bring transparency and accountability to the decisions, practices and structures that affect these outcomes. This study offers a contribution in support of ensuring that vulnerability and policing remain subject to critical scrutiny, rather than being accepted as neutral or inconsequential topics.

4.6. Research reflections and limitations

Reflections on the research have been raised throughout the chapter. However, the subject of conducting collaborative research in a policing environment is yet to be explored in detail. This final section explores this topic through an account of my personal research experience. Lastly, the study's limitations are discussed.

4.6.1. Doing collaborative research with the police: navigating the 'outsider–insider' continuum

While policing research has a long and rich history, collaborations between the police and research institutions are a more recent development (Engel and Whalen, 2010; Fenn et al., 2019). In this evolving field, research is formulated and delivered with police involvement, such that research is done *with*, rather than *on*, the police (Greene and Skinns, 2018: 56).

The growth of police-academic partnership work has been driven by agendas within both policing and academic domains. These include encouraging researchers to act as 'problem solvers' rather than 'problem raisers' (McAra, 2017: 768) and to produce work with a 'demonstrable impact on society' (Greene and Skinns, 2018: 56). There have also been calls for policing to become more evidence-based (Sherman, 1998; Buerger, 2010; Goode and Lumsden, 2018). Evidence-based policing, which came to the fore at the turn of the twenty-first century, asserts that 'research, evaluation, analysis, and scientific processes should have a "seat at the table" in law enforcement decision making about tactics, strategies and policies' (Lum and Koper, 2017: 3–4). Recognition of the value of collaboration between police and academic institutions is reflected in the growing number of research-based policing strategies, national institutions and funding bodies dedicated to such partnerships, and academic policing journals publishing contributions to the field (Hunter et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2018).

Collaborative research is not without challenges and cultural differences between policing and academic environments are widely recognised as a source of contention (Canter, 2004; Steinheider et al., 2012; Goode and Lumsden, 2018; Fenn et al., 2019). Indeed, different

traditions, priorities and rationales for practice have been identified as widening the gap between police and academic institutions (Dawson and Williams, 2009; Buerger, 2010). For example, Fenn et al.'s (2019: 138–9) study revealed how a lack of contextual and operational understanding between police officials and academics contributed to a 'strained relationship'. Marks et al. (2009) similarly consider whether such differences leave the two fields 'worlds apart'.

Police scepticism is often cited as a barrier to research (Campeau and Keesman, 2024: 5). Research consistently suggests that the police can be cautious and suspicious of 'outsiders' (Loftus, 2009; Reiner, 2010). This has been observed not only in relation to marginalised groups (Chapter Two, 2.3.1.) but also academic researchers (Reiner, 1992b; Canter, 2004; Loftus, 2009). Bradley and Nixon (2009: 427) observe how sustained criticism from academics on the outside towards police operations on the inside can make the police 'very defensive and often deeply unhappy about the spirit and tenor of the critical academic voice'. Likewise, Crawford (2020: 177) identifies how an 'ingrained culture of institutional defensiveness' in policing organisations can create barriers to learning from research, disadvantaging both policing and academic institutions.

With this context in mind, I was prepared to encounter difficulties during the research process, in particular expecting officers perhaps to show reluctance to engage with me or engaging only superficially. In practice, fortunately, few challenges of this nature arose. Given the hierarchical structure of the police organisation, it is likely that my association with senior officers – initially the gatekeeper and subsequently the NPT sergeants – aided my efforts from the outset to gain acceptance within the policing environment, access data and recruit participants. Had I not been introduced to constables and PCSOs by their sergeants, and to sergeants by the gatekeeper, gaining participants' trust and building positive relationships may have been more difficult, or at least taken longer.

Reflecting on my positionality also requires consideration of my standing as a young female researcher. Cultures of masculinity, which traditionally celebrate and emphasise aggression, strength and action, have long been identified as prevalent within policing organisations (Smith and Gray, 1985; Reiner, 2010; Silvestri, 2017). Within such an environment, female officers may encounter gender-based challenges, discrimination and bias that differ from those experienced by their male counterparts (Illias et al., 2024; Degerstedt et al., 2025). Baroness Casey's review (2023) of the Metropolitan Police, for example, documented troubling patterns of institutional sexism within the organisation.

Being a female researcher within a policing environment has also been associated with varied and sometimes contrasting experiences. Horn (1997), for example, speculates that her gender

may have encouraged some male officers to patronise, flirt with or attempt to impress her. Elsewhere, reflecting on her ethnographic research into policing in South Africa, Marks (2004: 881) suggests that being female may have worked to her advantage by encouraging officers to perceive her as 'innately… trustworthy', thereby facilitating positive interactions and her access to rich data. Other researchers have identified difficulties in establishing positive relationships with women officers (O'Neill, 2002; De Camargo, 2017). Kilgallon (2019: 119), for instance, observes how female officers may perceive female 'outsiders' as threatening to established dynamics within the occupational environment.

In my own experience, allowing for natural differences in personality, I did not generally sense hostility from the participants in this study, either from the outset or once we had shared some conversation. A small number appeared somewhat sceptical initially, but after I explained the reason for my presence and we had spent time together, officers generally appeared willing to engage with me. Indeed, none of those approached declined to participate or subsequently withdrew from the study. I can only speculate as to why this was the case and whether my gender, age, race, personality or other attributes played a role. Some indication that my personal characteristics may have shaped participants' perceptions of, and willingness to engage with, me came from one officer, who remarked that I was 'not what [he] expected a PhD student to be like' because I was 'surprisingly un-awkward'. Additionally, officers' own motivations may have encouraged engagement, as suggested by the gratitude some expressed for the opportunity to speak openly about their work and contribute to research that they considered important.

Regardless of the reasons participants chose to engage with the study, I increasingly sensed a level of trust towards me as time and conversations were shared between us (Marks, 2004). This was evident in how some participants disclosed to me personal views, stories and dilemmas, relating to both their work and private lives. At times, comments made to or in front of me were accompanied by remarks that they were 'off record' or 'just between you and me'. On one occasion, several officers were exchanging jokes about the local area when a sergeant turned to me and said, in a light-hearted tone, 'Don't be writing that down or we'll lose our jobs!'. On another occasion, relatively early in the fieldwork, an officer provided context for things I might witness, explaining that 'We [officers] sometimes use jokes as a coping mechanism – you'll see that a lot whilst you're with us'. While such comments imply that participants remained conscious of my 'outsider' status, the fact that these remarks were made in my presence regardless suggested that a meaningful degree of trust and acceptance of me had been secured.

Reflecting on this process demonstrates that my positionality as a researcher was not static throughout the fieldwork. Formally, I entered the research environment as an academic 'outsider'. However, my sustained presence, repeated interactions with officers and the development of rapport appeared to alter how participants related to me. Over time, I became increasingly familiar with their routines, language and working environment, while officers became more accustomed to my presence. I therefore came to occupy a more ambiguous position on the 'outsider–insider' continuum. Although I remained external to the police organisation and could not claim the experiential knowledge or occupational identity of an officer, I sensed I was no longer necessarily encountered solely as an unfamiliar 'outsider'. Repeated contact instead enabled a degree of integration into participants' everyday social world, which was important to achieving the depth sought through the case study design (Section 4.2.1.).

This developing position shaped both the type and depth of data I was able to access. As familiarity and trust grew, officers appeared increasingly willing to speak candidly, explain the context behind their actions and include me in informal conversations that may have been less readily accessible at the outset. My growing familiarity with the setting also enabled me to interpret encounters with greater contextual awareness and to recognise when further explanation or questioning might be valuable. At the same time, greater integration required continued reflexivity. Prolonged exposure carried the risk that certain practices or perspectives might become normalised to me, while the relationships developed during fieldwork could influence how I interpreted, and subsequently represented, participants and their work. I therefore remained conscious of the need to retain analytical distance and to distinguish rapport and familiarity from membership of the occupational group itself. My positionality can thus be understood as shifting along an 'outsider–insider' continuum over the course of the research, rather than occupying either position in a fixed or absolute sense.

The challenges that did arise during the fieldwork were often created by the structure of the police workforce, particularly movement into, within and out of NPTs. Some of this movement may have been attributable to the large-scale police recruitment agendas with which the study coincided, such as the 'officer uplift scheme' (Chapter Three, 3.5.). Many of the new recruits I encountered were students enrolled on degree programmes that required deployments across different policing departments. As these placements typically lasted five or ten weeks, opportunities for sustained contact with these student officers were limited.

More generally, relocations, team transfers, promotions and retirements all prompted changes in personnel, including changes to my gatekeeper. Between beginning the thesis programme in October 2021 and completing data collection in August 2023, the gatekeeper changed three

times because of changes in job title and status. Furthermore, low retention levels in policing—a well-documented issue (Wilson et al., 2023; Cooper and Ingram, 2004)—affected the research, with several participants leaving SYP during the fieldwork period.

The nature of police work itself also posed challenges. Demand was subject to constant change, with duties and commitments often arising unexpectedly and requiring research plans to be adjusted. Observations and interviews were sometimes postponed, while several visits involved considerable 'downtime', for example when officers were completing paperwork or waiting for a prisoner to be processed. This is not to suggest that such periods were necessarily unproductive, since they could themselves offer insight into the realities of police work, but some visits inevitably generated richer observational opportunities than others. Conversely, the unpredictability of demand could also be advantageous, with valuable observational opportunities sometimes arising through unplanned and unforeseen circumstances.

A final point for reflection concerns my encounters with members of the public. For the reasons explained in Section 4.6.2., I sought to maintain a low profile during interactions between police officers and citizens. However, for transparency and to distinguish myself from the police, I wore a high-visibility jacket with the word 'observer' printed prominently on the back. My presence nevertheless often attracted interest, and members of the public regularly asked who I was and why I was there. On numerous occasions, I was mistaken for a police officer, sometimes leading people to attempt to report matters to me or ask me for assistance. Misunderstandings about my role also occasionally meant that wariness or mistrust directed towards the police was extended to me. Other mistaken identities included being perceived as a social worker, council worker, officer in training or undercover officer. I corrected such assumptions by explaining that I was an independent researcher observing police practice.

Generally, this explanation was accepted, although on occasion members of the public suspected that I was attempting to mislead them. During one incident, for example, I removed myself from the interaction when a man refused to share his details with an officer in my presence because he believed I was gathering information about him for undisclosed purposes. Aside from rare instances such as this, my interactions with members of the public were kept to a minimum in an effort to limit my influence on the research setting.

Despite the well-documented challenges associated with collaborative research involving the police, in my experience such issues did not materialise to a problematic degree in this study, and its collaborative underpinning was considerably more enabling than constraining. Working with SYP provided access to contacts, knowledge and experiences that were crucial to the thesis and would likely have been impossible to obtain without the force's involvement. Furthermore, SYP's support for, and contribution to, the study may enhance its practical utility

and increase the likelihood that its findings are recognised and considered within other policing organisations.

4.6.2. Limitations of the research

Several limitations of this research have been noted throughout the chapter. This section explores some of these in more detail and considers how they may have shaped the validity, reliability and generalisability of the study's findings.

This study's validity was compromised in its ability to access the 'truth'. One way through which this may have surfaced regards participant bias. The fact that officers were aware of the purpose of my presence – to observe, interpret and comment upon their thoughts and practices – may have prompted them to change their behaviour to try and portray themselves in a good light and safeguard their reputation. This possibility is likely enhanced by the circumstance that the research was overtly conducted in participants' professional workplace. Interviews can provide a useful method through which to access people's internal thoughts and beliefs, on the supposition that participants have both the capacity and inclination to be 'telling it like it is' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013: 3-4). However, as this method relies on self-reported data, there is scope for a 'gap between word and deed' in what participants share (Bryman, 1984: 81).

Furthermore, officers may have changed how they presented themselves in response to their knowledge about the research. While providing a level of transparency about the study was necessary for ethical reasons, sharing this information may have encouraged participants to behave in ways presumed to be helpful for the research. Various events illustrate this possibility. During one visit, officers stopped and searched a young male in the street. Since nothing was found on his person, he was let go and the officers and I returned to the police car. One of the officers then said to me 'that's good for your research isn't it. You've gotten to see a stop-and-search now'. It is highly unlikely that this outcome informed the officer's decision to carry out the stop. Indeed, it was explained that the individual was stopped because he was known to the police for previous possession of weapons and drugs. Still, the officer's comment in the aftermath did make me wonder whether knowledge of my research may have had at least a small bearing on their actions. On other occasions, it seemed special efforts were made by participants to ensure that I was able to observe 'normal' neighbourhood policing duties. For example, sergeants would instruct members of their NPT to pause their deskwork and 'take [me] out' so that I could 'see some action'. Again, the inference here was my presence might have affected participants' activities and thus reduced its validity.

The study's validity and reliability may have been compromised through not only participant bias but my positionality also. The position of the researcher is one of responsibility and privilege as they are trusted to accurately, fairly and ethically collect and share with the audience an 'unfamiliar story world' (van Maanen, 1995: 103). To achieve these aims, it was important that I tried to remain as objective as possible in the execution of the study by conducting myself throughout from an open and self-aware position (Avakian, 2015: 80). The processes and reflections detailed in this chapter seek to provide evidence of these efforts.

Nonetheless, as noted in Section 4.2., my involvement instrumentally shaped the creation, development and presentation of the research. Initially, my own views, knowledge and interests steered early decisions of what literature was read, how it was understood and which themes should inform the research aim, questions and methodological approach. I decided which observational data were worth documenting and how they should be recorded, and I selected the interview topics and the order and phrasing of the questions (Bauer, 1996: 2, cited in Hollway and Jefferson, 2013: 29). The research was affected by my interpretations of participants' words; words are subjectively understood and used and thus 'any kind of account can only be a mediation of reality' between the speaker and the listener (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 11). Similarly, the analysis process included me imposing my own interpretations onto the data meaning that the final themes were subjectively selected, edited and deployed (Fine, 2002: 218). It is by this logic that Ely et al. (1997: 205-206) suggest that 'if themes "reside" anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them'. The main point here is that my input as the researcher was, consciously and subconsciously, woven into every stage of the research, meaning the extent to which I could conduct the research objectively was impeded.

The scope for my own bias to impact the research was perhaps exacerbated through my status as an 'outsider' working in an environment unfamiliar to me. Campeau and Keesman (2024: 12) consider how, in the context of observational methods, researchers may have access to only the outer traces of the cultures and arrangements within the research setting. My ability to access and understand information in the policing environment may have been further curtailed through my efforts to make observations as a third-party individual. This position was not only designed to reduce my impact on the research and uphold the study's ethical standards but also reflect the practical fact that I am not trained in policing. Hence, becoming overly involved in the policing activities I observed would have been inappropriate and potentially unsafe. The cost of trying to maintain this distance from the research environment, however, was that it may have capped the extent to which I was able to fully understand the nuances of the practices I was observing.

The counter argument is that being an 'outsider' allowed me to start off detached from the research environment which may have quelled the strength of any preconceptions and supported my efforts to obtain less biased interpretations (Kanuha, 2000). Furthermore, the distance was designed to improve the validity of the findings by minimising the effect of researcher presence and reducing the risk of 'going native', a term used to describe the process whereby a researcher becomes too close to their field of study and loses objectivity (O'Reilly, 2009: 89). To help manage this risk, I moved in and out of the field regularly, using periods outside the research environment to write up fieldnotes, reflect on emerging interpretations and maintain critical distance from the participants, practices and organisational assumptions being studied.

A common criticism of the case study approach regards the generalisability of its findings, since it actively prioritises detail over scope (Schwandt and Gates, 2018). Such criticisms are also directed towards qualitative research more generally; qualitative data can be difficult to compare both between participants and with other research, which may complicate attempts to situate its contribution and findings (Crowther and Lancaster, 2012: 145). This consideration is particularly pertinent to the present research because of its focus on neighbourhood policing. Since community policing models are traditionally orientated towards the dynamics, concerns and needs of particular communities (Chapter Three), caution is required when extending findings beyond the settings in which the research was conducted. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the findings should be taken as holding relevance only to the three case sites in which the research was conducted. Where officers elsewhere operate within comparable neighbourhood policing structures, organisational pressures and vulnerability-focused policy environments, aspects of the analysis may have wider resonance. The study therefore does not claim statistical or universal generalisability yet it may still support a degree of analytical transferability by identifying processes, tensions and patterns that can be considered in relation to other similar policing contexts.

The chosen methodological approaches certainly introduced some limitations to the research. However, discussion here and throughout the chapter has sought to explain and justify these choices by situating them within the objectives and parameters of the study and by emphasising the importance of prioritising ethically sound research.

4.7. Conclusion

This chapter explained how the research was designed and delivered in accordance with its aim, the conditions of the policing environment and the constraints of a doctoral thesis. It set

out the details of and justifications for its interpretivist paradigm and case study approach incorporating ethnographic traditions. The chapter laid out the research setting, in terms of its partner force, SYP, and the case study sites, as well as the processes by which the empirical data was collected and analysed. The measures taken to uphold ethical standards were presented, along with reflections on my position and experience as a researcher. It considered the value of collaborative research, especially in the context of the police, and sought to frame this study as a positive account of police-academic research. Finally, the limitations of the study were considered. Throughout, a reflexive lens has been applied to examine my impact on the research and the implications of my involvement.

Thus far, the thesis has examined the conceptual and policy context surrounding vulnerability and neighbourhood policing (Chapters Two, Three) and outlined the methodological design and implementation process of the research (Chapter Four). With this groundwork in place, the following four chapters present and analyse the empirical findings.

Chapter Five: Interpreting vulnerability as a priority in neighbourhood policing

This chapter explores neighbourhood officers' perceptions of the recent integration of vulnerability as a neighbourhood policing priority in SYP. It serves two overarching purposes. First, it sheds light on how the contemporary focus on vulnerability has shaped the orientation of neighbourhood policing and how officers conceptualised their role within an increasingly vulnerability-focused policy landscape. Second, it provides the groundwork for the subsequent findings chapters by enabling later analyses of neighbourhood policing practice to be situated within officers' accounts of their working conditions and its broader organisational context.

The chapter is organised into three main sections. The first examines how officers widely interpreted the recent focus on vulnerability as the formalisation of a longstanding police priority, driven by top-down efforts to improve organisational awareness and strengthen SYP's responses to vulnerability-related issues.

The second section explores how the focus on vulnerability encouraged officers to reframe people and behaviours traditionally understood as 'problematic' through the language and logic of vulnerability. It also introduces the subject of emotional labour, considering the affective demands placed on officers in vulnerability-focused policing and how this work shaped their perceptions.

The final section examines how officers understood vulnerability within the neighbourhood policing mandate. It shows how vulnerability was routinely framed as central to their work, and how neighbourhood policing aims and strategies were viewed as important to delivering vulnerability-focused work. It also highlights tensions arising from occupational cultures, working conditions and competing demands, which complicated officers' sense of responsibility and raised doubts about the fit between vulnerability-focused policing and what officers believed their remit should encompass.

5.1. The recent focus on vulnerability in South Yorkshire Police

This section examines officers' perceptions of the embedding of vulnerability as a key priority within SYP. By considering how they understood this development at the wider organisational level, it establishes an important foundation for the later analysis of vulnerability within neighbourhood policing specifically. This discussion is significant because policy within police organisations is not simply implemented from above; rather, it is interpreted, enacted

and constituted through the practices of frontline officers who, as Lipsky (1980) argues, operate as 'street-level bureaucrats'.

As outlined in Chapters One (1.1.) and Two (2.3.), vulnerability has increasingly become embedded as a prominent national policing priority. Officers' accounts indicated that developments within SYP mirrored these national trends, with many noting a clear and sustained rise in organisational attention to vulnerability in recent years. Several described how this shift had elevated vulnerability into a leading organising frame, shaping how they understood their role and approached their everyday work. As a PCSO and inspector stated in their interviews:

> 'Literally every job… it's always in your thought process to assess someone's vulnerabilities... It's almost inbuilt now in everything that we do' (PCSO3, Brookwood).

> '[V]ulnerability and protecting vulnerable people is obviously a key message for me, my team and SYP... [V]ulnerability and the risk surrounding people inform everything we do' (I3, Whitechurch).

A similar view arose during the observational fieldwork. For instance, a constable described:

> '*Vulnerability is at the centre of what we're thinking about… [I]t's at the forefront of how we look at things and go about our business*…' (Ashgrove, 26/01/23).

As these comments imply, vulnerability was often presented not as a specialist or individual concern, but as embedded within SYP's organisational strategies and priorities. This interpretation reflected force policy, with SYP's (2023) Police and Crime Plan positioning 'protecting vulnerable people' as the first of its three core priorities.[29][30] An inspector made explicit the link between the organisation's strategic agenda and the operational focus of frontline policing, suggesting that the current emphasis on vulnerability stemmed from a 'top down… strategic vision' (I3, Whitechurch) that had been filtered through the force:

[29] This priority is followed by those of 'Tackling crime and anti-social behaviour' and 'Treating people fairly' (SYP, 2023).

[30] SYP's latest Police and Crime Plan (SYP, 2025) sets out five new priorities, with the previous objective of protecting vulnerable people no longer listed as a standalone priority. While vulnerability remains present in the plan, including in the commitment that 'in all cases, the approach taken by the police and partners will be to protect the vulnerable' (SYP, 2025: 34), its reduced prominence illustrates the evolving nature of policing and social policy, with concepts rising and falling in significance as organisational and political agendas and vocabularies develop over time.

> ‘It starts from the top down, the strategic vision to protect vulnerable people... It's not just one person doing it, it's embedded throughout the force… and everybody knows its importance on a day-to-day basis…’ (I3, Whitechurch).

A sergeant similarly described:

> ‘… protecting vulnerable people is up there [with], if not more important than, tackling crime and ASB in this organisation, and it has been at the forefront of what we've done for six, seven years now’ (S1, Whitechurch).

The sense that vulnerability had been placed ‘at the forefront’ of SYP priorities within the last ‘six, seven years’ (S1, Whitechurch) is significant because it frames this focus as a relatively recent development. This view was widely supported. Reflecting on his two-decade policing career, an inspector described vulnerability as having emerged through a recent ‘movement’ (I1, Brookwood):

> ‘I would say [vulnerability] was seen less [before] and it's more of a focus now… There's definitely been a movement’ (I1, Brookwood).

Similarly, a sergeant contrasted current practice with earlier approaches, describing how vulnerability had shifted from ‘never… be[ing] a thing as such’ to being ‘in everything’ (S2, Brookwood). Another reiterated:

> ‘The whole… really getting into the bones of vulnerability is a much more recent kind of development within SYP’ (S1, Whitechurch).

Some officers identified practical changes associated with this shift towards vulnerability, particularly in how incidents were assessed and recorded. As one constable explained, in every case they reported, ‘*We write down anything we think is related to vulnerability*’ (Whitechurch, 04/04/23). A sergeant similarly observed that:

> ‘[E]very time we submit a crime report… we assess the vulnerability… That never used to exist on the crime reporting system’ (S2, Brookwood).

These accounts suggest that the focus on vulnerability represented more than a shift in language; it also carried practical implications for how policing was organised and delivered.

While the focus on vulnerability was generally identified as a recent development, several officers suggested that vulnerability itself had long held central relevance to police work. For example, one constable stated: ‘*I’d say that [vulnerability] is something we’ve always dealt with... It’s always been important*’ (Ashgrove, 26/01/23). This understanding of vulnerability as intrinsic to policing was reinforced by a sergeant who described ‘*dealing with vulnerability*’ as being ‘*at the heart of [policing]*’ (Whitechurch, 25/03/23), and by a constable who noted

that, in routine police work, 'every officer is aware that there will be vulnerabilities along the way' (PC6, Whitechurch). Such accounts echo the view of vulnerability as a longstanding police concern, as discussed in Chapter Two (2.3.).

Sometimes officers explained vulnerability as a traditional policing focus by linking it to core police functions of safety, protection and safeguarding. For instance:

> 'I think [vulnerability] has always been very prevalent. Policing in general across the UK is about keeping people safe' (CI1, HQ).

> '[Policing] is just making sure that we recognise where there is vulnerability... [to] make sure that people are as safe as possible… Most of policing is about safeguarding in one way or another' (PC6, Whitechurch).

These accounts reflect the view of police work as largely orientated towards welfare and the broader remit of maintaining social order (Chapter Two, 2.3.1.). This welfare-centred understanding of policing was also connected to the Peelian principles underpinning the British policing model (Chapter Three, 3.1.). For instance, an inspector framed the police mandate as being rooted in helping people:

> 'It's about dragging it back to those principles of why we're here. You know when Robert Peel created the police force… they fundamentally were about helping people… [T]hat's what it's about' (I2, Ashgrove).

A PCSO similarly described support for vulnerable people as integral to the police role:

> 'As cops, I think most of you don't really need like any encouragement… to try and help those [vulnerable] people... That is part and parcel of what cops do and have done for a long time. It's just probably more formalised now' (PCSO3, Brookwood).

The sense that the duty to assist vulnerable people was not only 'part and parcel of what cops… have done for a long term' but also something that had now been 'formalised' (PCSO3, Brookwood) is important. Where vulnerability was understood as an enduring element of police work, the recent focus on it was interpreted less as the creation of a new responsibility than as the explicit recognition and reframing of work for which officers had long been responsible. This aligns with the view that it is the recent prominence and operationalisation of vulnerability in policing that constitutes something novel, rather than the concept of vulnerability itself (Chapter Two, 2.3.). As Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron (2021: 4, emphasis added) argue, 'what is new is how the *language* of "vulnerability"… now permeates policy and practice discourse in the field of policing'.

The sense that vulnerability represented a new framing through which to view old issues, rather than a new set of issues to address, was expressed during the fieldwork, with a constable suggesting:

> '*It's now obviously become an official priority in our guidelines and frameworks and stuff, but… vulnerability's always been a thing… [The recent explicit focus on vulnerability] is just us trying something new basically*' (Brookwood, 09/03/23).

Similarly, another constable described the recent focus as a new label for a longstanding police priority:

> 'If you look at policing twenty years ago, ten years ago… we've always had communities that are vulnerable, but it was never badged this way… Obviously policing is an evolving concept so, you know, we do come up with new ways of working' (PC1, Ashgrove).

A PCSO reiterated this point, suggesting that the focus on vulnerability was not wholly new but rather a more explicit and organised attempt to improve practice:

> 'It wasn't anything that we weren't trying to do previously. It's just that your potential for success is better if you do make everybody more aware and really try and drive it' (PCSO3, Brookwood).

This comment illustrates how the recent focus on vulnerability in SYP was understood as part of an organisational effort to establish a clearer and more unified objective. Some officers felt this had improved awareness and promoted more informed and consistent understandings across the force. As two inspectors explained:

> 'Before, it was always present but there wasn't as much emphasis put on it... [Awareness of vulnerability] is a lot higher now than it was when I joined [in 2008]' (I4, HQ),

> 'We have a better understanding of vulnerability… it's always been known and always been a key priority, but it's the understanding now' (I3, Whitechurch).

Overall, the accounts in this section show that the recent focus on vulnerability was often understood as the formalisation and relabelling of something long embedded within core policing principles and functions. The placing of vulnerability 'at the forefront' (S1, Whitechurch) of SYP's strategic agenda, and of frontline officers' thinking and activities, was generally viewed as an organisational effort to improve understanding and encourage more consistent practice across the force. This, in turn, invites closer examination of the specific

perspectives and practices advanced by vulnerability as an organising frame. The next section explores this subject.

5.2. Vulnerability as an interpretive lens for reframing police 'problems'

The recent focus on vulnerability was not understood simply as the recognition of an enduring feature of everyday policing, nor as a shift in organisational priority-setting or rhetoric. Rather, as this section examines, officers perceived vulnerability as a framework through which police 'problems' – that is, people and behaviours traditionally viewed as 'problematic' – could be understood and addressed through the language and logic of vulnerability.

Officers described being increasingly expected not only to *focus on vulnerability*, but to interpret their work, and the people and situations they encountered, *through a vulnerability lens*. This was illustrated by an inspector who suggested that, across the various problems his NPT faced, 'vulnerability pretty much lies at the heart' of them all (I1, Brookwood). A sergeant similarly described how 'vulnerability bleeds into every aspect of my role, completely' (S4, Whitechurch). Similar sentiments also surfaced during the observational fieldwork, with a constable remarking:

> '*…in every case we come across now there is pretty much always some key angle around vulnerability we need to find and tackle*…' (Ashgrove, 26/01/23).

As these comments imply, the vulnerability lens encouraged officers to interpret the people and situations they encountered as shaped by deeper underlying vulnerabilities. An inspector reaffirmed this view by suggesting that a focus on vulnerability enabled officers to look beyond presenting problems and uncover their underlying causes:

> '[W]hat it [the focus on vulnerability] causes you to do… is peel away those layers to actually get to the root of a problem because... the problem isn't that they've got no food in the fridge or they've got no money for the electric… That's a symptom of whatever it is, but it causes us to get in there and actually try and find out what it is' (I2, Ashgrove).

As this comment illustrates, the vulnerability lens was seen as a means of distinguishing a problem's visible symptoms from its underlying causes. Immediate signs of an issue, such as a lack of food or money as per the inspector's example above, were therefore not viewed as the problem itself, but as manifestations of deeper vulnerabilities. This encouraged officers to

look beyond surface-level issues and consider the wider conditions that might be producing them. As a PCSO explained:

> '*I often find as soon as you do a bit of digging around… you'll probably find that something happened at some point and there's some sort of vulnerability underneath there somewhere and then it's like "ah right, their behaviour makes sense now!*"' (Whitechurch, 25/01/23).

An inspector demonstrated a similar perspective when discussing behaviours linked to alcohol abuse:

> 'Why are they drinking? And I guarantee without fail, if you start peeling it back, you'll find somewhere there'll be childhood abuse, could be witnessing domestic abuse, there'll be, you know, sexual abuse as a kid. There will be something. There will be a flag somewhere… because drinking isn't the problem, being pissed isn't the problem... It's just a symptom of it' (I2, Ashgrove).

The idea that 'problem' behaviours may stem from deeper vulnerabilities has important implications for how agency and culpability are understood. As Section 5.2.1. outlines, viewing conduct through a vulnerability lens foregrounds the potential vulnerability of offenders and challenges assumptions that individuals are wholly responsible for their actions, thus blurring the traditional victim–offender divide in policing (Chapter Two, 2.3.2.).

Distinguishing between visible manifestations of a problem and its underlying causes resembles a problem-solving approach. As outlined in Chapter Three (Section 3.1.), problem-solving policing, or problem-orientated policing, aims to reduce crime, disorder and other recurring issues by identifying and addressing their causes (Goldstein, 1979; 1990; COP, 2022a). In this study, the vulnerability lens meant that vulnerability itself, understood as the driver of police 'problems', was often cast as the 'problem' to be solved. As an inspector explained:

> 'Pretty much every set of problems we come across with the problem-solving approach, there is going to be one or multiple angles around vulnerability that we need to try and find some way to address' (I1, Brookwood).

Research widely highlights the effectiveness of problem-orientated policing strategies in addressing crime, disorder and other community problems (Hinkle et al., 2020; 2024; Bullock et al., 2021; 2022). Reflecting this consensus in the context of vulnerability-focused work, officers consistently framed the identification of underlying vulnerabilities as essential to understanding and addressing the 'root of a problem' (I2, Ashgrove). This diagnostic process

is a core stage of problem-solving approaches (Eck and Spelman, 1987; Clarke and Eck, 2005). As a PCSO and inspector suggested:

> '… *understanding where there's vulnerability lets you understand what you're facing… [F]rom there, you can better figure out how to fix it*' (Whitechurch, 25/01/23).

> '[H]ow can you ever even think about the right interventions if you don't understand what the problem is?' (I2, Ashgrove).

In a similar vein, officers emphasised that approaching issues through a vulnerability lens enabled them to deliver more effective interventions and attain longer-term benefits:

> '[The] focus on vulnerability… was triggered, and still is to a degree, by this appreciation that if we deal with vulnerable people just as daily business, you'll keep dealing with them until they die, because nobody's actually getting underneath, peeling layers away and seeing actually what's the issue' (I2, Ashgrove).

> '… you've got to sort of think a little bit out of the box and take that step back and have a look at what causing it and remove whatever's causing that problem… Getting to the root cause of it is what actually resolves it long-term' (S3, Ashgrove).

This framing of vulnerability as a cause or driver of police 'problems' was sometimes described as a relatively recent development. For instance, an inspector and chief inspector both observed that greater emphasis was now placed on identifying why an issue existed:

> '[N]ow we are trying to identify the cause…whereas before it would have been: "no, you're just a criminal"' (I4, HQ).

> '[During] the first 13 years of my service… there wasn't massive scope to look at long-term problem solving… [P]roblem solving wasn't prevalent… We've come on leaps and bounds since that' (CI1, HQ).

Officers most often applied this vulnerability lens when discussing social groups whose behaviours have traditionally been framed as problematic. For example, the activities and lifestyles of the 'street cohort' were frequently contextualised as consequences of past experiences and underlying vulnerabilities:

> 'It's not as simple as somebody just sleeping on the street. There's a reason why they're on the street' (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

Research has long highlighted the prevalence of complex trauma, abuse and adversity among people experiencing homelessness and street-based lifestyles (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013; Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2018; Ivanich and Warner, 2019). Echoing this scholarship, officers often

identified past trauma and/or abuse as key drivers of 'problem' behaviours among the 'street cohort':

> 'A majority [of the 'street cohort'] are [self-medicating] for a lot of traumas that have happened in their past... and then they're reliant on either drugs or alcohol or both' (PC5, Whitechurch).

> 'You aren't dealing with a very straightforward person. It's usually, you know, childhood trauma, PTSD, and that leads onto the addiction [and] the behavioural issues that we deal with…' (S1, Whitechurch).

Such examples illustrate how certain lifestyles were framed as products of past adversity and underlying vulnerability. They also reflect wider literature suggesting that exposure to disadvantage and harm can contribute to long-term hardship and subsequent behavioural challenges (Squires, 2006; Boullier and Blair, 2018).

Similar patterns emerged in officers' interpretations of young people involved in crime or antisocial behaviour. An inspector and sergeant both described how a focus on vulnerability enabled young people's 'problem' conduct to be situated in context and understood as a manifestation of deeper vulnerabilities:

> '[The focus on vulnerability] has helped us understand [youth crime and antisocial behaviour] more and how that vulnerability can make them more likely to be brought into something or easily led… or to explain how they're acting …' (I4, HQ).

> 'Generally, the [young] people that we deal with that are committing ASB, they don't go to school full-time… their parents don't work or are on drugs or have got some sort of vulnerability of their own… A lot of the youths in the area, they've been brought up by parents that have done the same… so it's sort of ingrained into them that that's how to behave…' (S2, Brookwood).

As these comments demonstrate, officers often emphasised how early childhood experiences could shape later behaviours and life trajectories. Such views echo literature claiming that children and young people, when compared to most adults, are especially susceptible to influence and affected by their surroundings (James et al., 1998; Hallett, 2016; Francis-Oliviero et al., 2023). In this study, officers regularly contextualised young people's 'problem' behaviours in relation to their upbringing. For example, one constable commented on the criminal conduct of two brothers by stating: '*They are proper naughty… but their dad's a dickhead so course they'd behave like that*' (Brookwood, 28/03/23). Elsewhere, two constables recounted similar situations:

> '*… his home life, it's total chaos. Dad's got huge alcohol problems, mum has a history of neglect, criminal records, et cetera… When you see it like that, [his behaviour] is hardly a surprise is it*' (Ashgrove, 17/05/23).
>
> 'We put a warrant in last week for a young guy that was dealing… but then when you look at his home environment, his mum is so chaotic it's untrue, his little brother's got social anxiety… and it's like, how much is he a product of what he's around?' (PC8, Ashgrove).

The framing of young people's behaviour as 'a product of what [they are] around' (PC8, Ashgrove) reflects Francis-Oliviero et al.'s (2023) argument that this population's conduct must be interpreted within the broader circumstances in which they occur.

Where officers understood 'problem' behaviours as manifestations of deeper underlying factors, questions of agency and culpability became central to how issues were conceptualised through a vulnerability lens. The next section explores this in more detail.

5.2.1. Reframing 'problem' behaviours as products of constrained agency: reconceptualising offenders as victims

When 'problem' behaviours were interpreted as shaped by underlying vulnerability-related forces, officers tended to view them as arising from circumstances beyond an individual's control. This led many to understand certain people as having reduced agency and, therefore, diminished culpability for their actions. For example, officers suggested that children's involvement in drug crime was more likely to reflect deeper-rooted vulnerabilities linked to exploitation and neglect than deliberate or wilful deviance:

> '[T]hey're obviously being exploited by someone. And they've not got their own life skills to know whether it was the right or wrong thing to do, perhaps not got a structured family network… and they look for that reassurance and those relationships somewhere else and then they get dragged into this' (PC5, Whitechurch).
>
> '[T]hese days with all the county lines stuff with young people getting brought into that… Historically, they would've been a suspect and they are still a suspect, but you've got to think they're still a child and they're being exploited' (S3, Ashgrove).

Two constables further reiterated the idea that, through a vulnerability lens, children's criminal behaviour could be understood as a product of constrained agency. One suggested that 'it might

be a case of they might not fully understand the consequences of their actions' (PC8, Ashgrove). The other described:

> 'With the kids [who have committed crime]… we don't like to view them as [criminals] because we like to think we haven't lost them at that stage and that we should look at their vulnerability… because the way we look at it, it is exploitation rather than a choice' (PC2, Brookwood).

Officers made similar arguments in relation to the 'street cohort', where 'problem' behaviours were often reconstituted as symptoms of underlying issues that could potentially constrain individuals' decision-making capacities. As two inspectors emphasised:

> '[T]he… question is: would anybody – a reasonable person in sound mind – make that lifestyle choice? Probably not, so then there's issues around drug dependency, alcoholism, mental health… Possibly all of those all intertwine to make these people make this lifestyle choice' (I1, Brookwood).

> 'For some of them, it is a lifestyle choice… They'll not sleep at home because they want to sleep on the street… But then the issue is: are they mentally well? Are they doing it because of the drug issue that they've got?' (I4, HQ).

Similar reflections surfaced in observational fieldnotes. Two constables considered how interactions between past trauma, addiction and poor mental health could reduce some people's capacity to make choices freely:

> '… *they might believe themselves to be free in making a choice but because of where their head is at, because of what might have happened to them in the past, they've been affected by that and actually they're not [free to make that choice]*' (Brookwood, 09/03/23).

> '*[Addiction] can mess with your brain to stop you being able to make sensible decisions… You can lose that ability to think straight*' (Ashgrove, 26/01/23).

Together, these accounts show how the vulnerability lens encouraged officers to interpret 'problem' behaviours not as straightforward expressions of agency, but as symptoms of underlying constraints shaped by past and present conditions. This reframing often led those engaging in such behaviours to be reconceptualised as 'victims of their circumstances' (S4, Whitechurch), rather than as fully autonomous actors.

As Chapter Two (2.2.; 2.3.) outlined, victims have conventionally been the group most readily accepted as vulnerable. This framing occasionally emerged in this study, such as when a constable defined vulnerable people as those 'more susceptible to being repeat victims of

crime' (PC1, Ashgrove), and when a sergeant suggested that '[m]ost victims we deal with are vulnerable in one way or another' (S2, Brookwood). Under traditional victim-focused narratives, offenders have often been excluded from recognition as vulnerable, yet contemporary policy developments have sought to extend the parameters of vulnerability to encompass those conventionally less readily accepted as vulnerable (Chapter Two, 2.2.3.; 2.3.2.). This broader interpretation, which challenges the conventional binary between victims and offenders, was consistently reflected in officers' accounts. For example:

> '[O]n every job… we're not just thinking of the victim. The suspect can be vulnerable as well…' (S3, Ashgrove).

A constable reinforced this point by contrasting current, more holistic approaches with the more rigid categorisations of the past:

> '… It [was] very much a case of people are either victims or witnesses or suspects… The more you see of it, the more you probably realise [that] actually, there's a lot of people that are suspects that were probably neglected or abused as kids' (PC8, Ashgrove).

This expanded approach was exemplified in an inspector's account of a young person who had committed harmful behaviours and had a cognitive impairment that impeded her ability to apply moral reasoning. For this officer, these circumstances gave the individual the dual status of perpetrator and victim:

> 'She's probably got the most investigations on our system, but she has a brain injury… You could talk to her about what's right and what's wrong when it comes to sexual activity but then it's when she has to apply that, she has no idea, she can't do it… [S]he's both a perpetrator and a victim. She's a bad perpetrator... but… she's extremely vulnerable in her own right' (I2, Ashgrove).

These data show how the vulnerability lens was used to explain 'problem' behaviours as symptoms of underlying vulnerabilities and constrained agency. This reframing challenged the traditional victim–offender divide by emphasising that offenders may also be victims, and by unsettling understandings of such individuals as wilfully deviant and wholly culpable for their actions. It also complicates questions of police intervention. If behaviours are understood as products of circumstance and limited agency, rather than free choice, decisions about when and how police should respond arguably become more difficult and require more nuance. These issues are revisited in Chapter Eight's analysis of officers' responses to vulnerable people.

5.2.2. The emotional demands and implications of framing police 'problems' through a lens of vulnerability

Officers' mobilisation of vulnerability as a way of explaining police 'problems' was not a neutral or passive exercise. Rather, it placed particular affective demands on officers, encouraging, if not requiring, them to manage and display certain emotional responses. In this sense, framing issues through a vulnerability lens involved officers undertaking emotional labour.

For Hochschild (1979; 1983; 2003), emotional labour refers to the management of feeling as a condition of employment. It captures how emotions and behaviours are governed by organisational rules that determine how people should feel and respond in ways deemed 'appropriate to the situation' (Hochschild, 1979: 552). In this study, this refers to the emotional work required of officers when performing their neighbourhood policing duties. Within an increasingly vulnerability-focused landscape, this emotional work may be heightened by expectations that officers adopt more compassionate, sensitive and trauma-informed approaches to the people and situations they encounter (Hesketh and Tehrani, 2018; Dehaghani, 2019; Bateson et al., 2020).

The following subsections examine two prominent dimensions of this emotional work and how they shaped officers' understandings. First, empathy is considered as a required emotion in vulnerability-focused policing. Second, attention turns to the emotional strain and pressures associated with this work.

5.2.2.1. Empathy as a required emotion in police work

Previous research finds that the extent to which officers can and do portray emotion in their work is tightly controlled (van Gelderen et al., 2007; Reiner, 2010; Schaible and Six, 2016). As Lennie et al. (2020: 2) note, 'the expression of emotion is severely restricted within police culture: on a daily basis police officers engage with emotionally demanding work and are required to display the appropriate emotions in response'. They (2020: 2) further suggest that policing has conventionally undervalued '"soft skills" involving emotions, caring, communication or human service work'.

The marginalisation of 'soft skills' reflects the influence of dominant occupational cultures that emphasise action-orientated work, crime-fighting, authority and coercive power (Smith and Gray, 1985; Reiner, 2010; Campeau and Keesman, 2024). As Bell and Eski (2015: 97) observe, police culture is typically characterised by masculine values such as 'bravery, independence

and emotional self-control'. Despite the reality that much police work involves slower-paced, non-crime and service-orientated tasks, these cultural norms have long persisted (Chapter Three, 3.1.1.).

Against this backdrop, officers' accounts indicated a shift in the emotional expectations attached to police practice in the context of vulnerability-focused work. In particular, the recent focus on vulnerability was understood to have made the expression of certain emotions not merely preferable but seemingly required within contemporary policing standards. Foremost among these was empathy. This perspective surfaced clearly in the observational fieldnotes, when a constable reflected on perceived changes in policing narratives and understandings of vulnerability:

> '*I think it is better than it used to be. It's a big ship to steer but it has [changed]. Back in the 80s, pre-PACE [Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984], it was very much "us versus them", whereas now there's a lot more empathy… It's in the Code of Ethics that you've got to have emotional intelligence and empathy*' (Brookwood, 09/03/23).[31]

The concept of empathy derives from the ancient Greek words *en*, meaning inside, and *pathos*, meaning pain, suffering or feeling, translating directly as 'feeling inside' (Camassa, 2023: 4). For Coplan (2011: 5), empathy is a 'complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation'. In essence, it refers to the capacity to understand and imaginatively enter into the experiences of others. In policing and criminal justice more broadly, empathy is reflected in empathetic criminology, which calls for unconditional recognition of the shared humanity of all individuals (Millie and Hirschler, 2024). From this perspective, criminal or harmful actions do not negate a person's status as a human being deserving of dignity and respect (Millie, 2016: 121–122).

Officers in this study frequently demonstrated such a perspective, emphasising the importance of retaining compassion, or a so-called 'human side' (S4, Whitechurch), in their work:

> 'I don't think you'd be a good officer if you didn't have emotion… I think first and foremost, you've got to have empathy for someone's situation... You've got to keep hold of your human side in this job… If you haven't got emotion in this job, you may as well quit' (S4, Whitechurch).

[31] The Code of Ethics and its supporting ethical policing principles, including that which sets out the expectation for officers to show empathy, is published by the COP and is available at: https://www.college.police.uk/ethics/code-of-ethics (accessed 16/03/26).

This sergeant's statement directly challenges traditional portrayals of police culture that frame emotional expression as weakness (Pogrebin and Poole, 1991; Reiner, 2010), instead positioning empathy as a professional expectation. This connects to vulnerability as an interpretive lens because, as prior discussion in this section (5.2.) explored, focusing on vulnerability encouraged officers to recognise the hardship experienced by those they encountered, thereby prompting and legitimising empathetic responses. A PCSO illustrated this in relation to the 'street cohort':

> 'It cannot be an easy life living on the street. It really can't. Being a drug [addict]... being an alcoholic. You've got to acknowledge that' (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

A sergeant echoed this view when reflecting on individuals involved in serious offending. He reiterated the idea of 'problem' behaviours as products of adverse circumstances and constrained agency, rather than individual moral failings:

> 'I do feel sorry for a lot of the people that we deal with… Even if I'm booking them in for a terrible crime… you understand that they're an absolute victim of their circumstances and… they never had a hope, never had a chance. How are they supposed to have been a functional, "normal" person in society when they had a horrendous upbringing that's turned them into a monster?' (S4, Whitechurch).

This empathetic framing also appeared to soften the traditional 'us versus them' divide frequently identified within police culture (Reiner, 2010; Campeau and Keesman, 2024). As Chapter Two (2.3.1.) outlined, groups traditionally conceptualised as different and 'problematic' have often been seen and treated by police as undesirable and antagonistic. In this study, however, expressions of empathy and the emphasis on vulnerability led several officers to recognise a sense of proximity between themselves and such groups. During the observational fieldwork, for example, a constable reflected on public attitudes towards certain members of the 'street cohort' and imagined what she might do in similar circumstances:

> '*When they [the public] look at homeless people or someone who's alcohol dependent they'll just be like: "Oh look at them, fucking get a job, you're shit". But if you get some of those people sober and speak to them and [they] tell you about their lives, well, I'd probably be fucking downing a bottle as well*' (Brookwood, 22/02/23).

A similar sentiment emerged during an encounter between a PCSO and a member of the 'street cohort':

> *It's nearly 8.30 on a Wednesday morning when a man stumbles round a street corner. He looks unkempt and walks with a limp, which I later learn is the result of infection from injecting heroin into his legs. After exchanging friendly greetings, the man asks*

> *the PCSO what time the bank opens, explaining that he needs to collect his benefits payout. (The officer tells me afterwards that he believes this money will be spent by the man buying his 'next fix'). Checking his watch, the PCSO replies '9 o'clock mate, in about half an hour', to which the man says 'thanks' before heading off in the direction of the bank. Once out of earshot, the officer tells me the man's story. He says: 'He used to be a doctor, a GP, until his life fell apart. [He] developed an alcohol addiction, lost his wife, lost his job and now he's on the streets… Hard to believe… but none of us are too far away from that happening. None of us are untouchable*' (Whitechurch, 26/04/23).

The sentiment that '*[n]one of us are untouchable*' (Whitechurch, 26/04/23) demonstrates explicitly an empathetic perspective by recognising the fragility of human life and social stability, and the possibility that adversity could affect anyone. Similarly, a constable elsewhere suggested that all people are exposed to the risk of hardship:

> '*Anyone is… three bad days away from being on the streets… You lose your job, you lose your mortgage, you're there aren't you? Could happen to any of us*' (Ashgrove, 20/03/23).

These reflections resonate with theoretical perspectives that conceptualise vulnerability as an inherent feature of the human condition (Chapter Two, 2.1.2.). However, as Chapter Six establishes, officers in this study did not typically frame vulnerability as a universal condition, instead tending to view it as exceptional and shaped by situational factors. Nonetheless, the accounts above show that several officers recognised a shared potential among people to experience adversity, meaning that, as a sergeant put it, 'anybody can become vulnerable' (S3, Ashgrove).

These findings suggest that encouraging officers to interpret police 'problems' through vulnerability adjusted the emotional expectations attached to such work. By foregrounding the broader contexts of hardship and constrained agency understood to drive 'problem' behaviours, vulnerability-focused policing called for empathetic perspectives that softened the traditional 'us versus them' narrative often associated with police culture (Chapter Two, 2.3.1.).

5.2.2.2. The emotional toll of police work

While empathy was widely observed as a key dimension of framing police 'problems' through a vulnerability lens, its expression was not always straightforward. Most clearly, the emotional

toll of policing, accumulated through repeated exposure to demanding and often distressing situations, sometimes challenged officers' ability to display empathy consistently. In this sense, the emotional labour involved in their work extended beyond the requirement to show empathy to include managing the psychological strain generated by the conditions of police work.

Research consistently documents policing as an emotionally demanding occupation with the potential to negatively affect officers' mental and physical health (Violanti et al., 2013; 2018; Jackman et al., 2020; Davies et al., 2023). Officers routinely confront violence and suffering and are regularly expected to 'deal with the most appalling injuries inflicted upon men, women and children' (Emsley, 2009: 283; Chapter Two, 2.3.1.). Several officers noted this emotional weight of their work. For example:

> 'It's difficult… You really see some difficult things… [The job] does impact on officers. It can't not' (I3, Whitechurch).

> 'Sometimes some of the jobs could be affecting me a day or two after the event.… I get stressed and a lot of the time I do overthink about what could potentially go wrong… [S]ometimes you're thinking "How am I going to cope with this?"' (PC7, Ashgrove).

One way officers managed these demands was through emotional distancing. Emotional labour scholarship suggests that those working in emotionally intensive environments may depersonalise aspects of their work to limit stress and reduce the risk of burnout (Hochschild, 1979; 1983; 2003; Bakker and Heuven, 2006; Schaible and Gecas, 2010). As outlined in Chapter Two (2.3.1.), repeated exposure to difficult situations can produce what Reiner (2010: 120) describes as 'a hard skin of bitterness', developed partly as a way of coping with the strains of the job. In this study, some officers indicated that they adopted such strategies. During an interview, a PCSO reflected on how he had developed a level of emotional detachment through his occupational experiences:

> PCSO3, Brookwood: '… you almost have to detach yourself from it… But some of it does obviously affect me'
>
> Researcher: 'Over time, would you say you've become almost hardened?'
>
> PCSO3, Brookwood: 'Yeah, which is quite sad in a way, isn't it?'

A similar view emerged during the observational fieldwork when a constable stated:

> '*You can't get too caught up in [your emotions]. At the end of the day, you've got a job to do so you have to get on with it'* (Brookwood, 09/03/23).

A sergeant also described the need to manage feelings while carrying out police duties. His emphasis on this being especially difficult at the beginning of a policing career reinforces the sense that officers may become increasingly emotionally hardened over time:

> 'I certainly think when you first join the police it's really tough, you know, when you feel a bit sorry for somebody. But you've still got to do what you've [got to do]… You can't deviate from that… [Y]ou have to be firm and… say: "this is the decision I've made, it's going to happen"' (S3, Ashgrove).

These comments indicate that, while officers recognised the importance of empathy (5.2.2.1.), they also viewed emotional distancing as necessary to perform their duties and protect their wellbeing. This reflects literature showing that officers may use emotional detachment as a coping mechanism to manage the demands of police work (Pogrebin and Poole, 1991; Daus and Brown, 2012). As Lennie et al. (2020: 7) found, displays of emotion were sometimes regarded by officers as 'not being suitable as a police officer'.

Processes of emotional separation also surfaced in how officers dealt with abuse during encounters with the public. Research suggests that officers both experience, and *expect to* experience, hostility and abuse when conducting their work (Skolnick, 1966; Loftus, 2009; Reiner, 2010). As McLaughlin (2007: 55) argues, officers 'expect to be viewed by many members of the public as uniforms rather than as individuals and to be routinely called "pigs" and "the filth" by some sections of society'. A constable in this study described such treatment as '*part of the job*' (Whitechurch, 14/04/23). A PCSO similarly reflected:

> '… the nature of the beast is that if somebody is rattling and they're having a bad day then I'll bear the brunt of it' (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

Such experiences, and officers' capacity to become hardened against them over time, were evident in the observational fieldwork. On one occasion, a constable who had just been verbally abused by a teenage boy reflected that repeated exposure to similar incidents had reduced her susceptibility to being affected by them:

> *It is 8pm on a Friday when the team receive a call through the radio. A worker at a restaurant in the city centre has reported a large group of youths harassing people in and around the establishment. I join a sergeant and constable in a police car and we travel to the scene. A circle of teenagers loitering outside quickly disperse as they see the police car approaching. The constable quickly jumps out the vehicle and runs into the building shouting 'Oi, get out! Get out now!'. Within seconds, at least 10 teenagers pour out the door. A few shout back and while it's hard to hear what they are saying amid the cacophony, there's no mistaking the words of one boy: 'fuck off you fat slag!'.*

> *When the constable returns, the sergeant asks if she heard the comment. She laughs and says 'I've been called much worse!... It's been a long time since a comment like that's bothered me!*' (Whitechurch, 14//04/23).

On another occasion, a constable described how regular interactions with a group of local youths involved in antisocial behaviour had caused him to become '*more numb*' (Brookwood, 09/03/23) to confrontation and abuse:

> '*They're disagreeing with the uniform. I don't care if [the kids] don't like me… The more you experience, the more numb you get to it. Maybe that's a bad thing, I don't know… At one point, I'd look for an easy option to try and get the kids on side. Now I'm not bothered… They're just rough kids… [T]hey're going to give you shit*' (Brookwood, 09/03/23).

These examples illustrate how repeated exposure to hostility can push officers towards emotional detachment. This reflects research identifying the prevalence and implications of emotional dissonance and emotional exhaustion in police work (Schaible and Gecas, 2010; Kenworthy et al., 2014). A chief inspector echoed these dynamics in relation to the cumulative psychological toll of repeatedly engaging in the same work without necessarily seeing positive outcomes. She described how such experiences could produce empathy fatigue and emotional detachment:

> '[When] you've got officers who are going out to return someone home, probably fatigued by the fact this is the 17th time this year that they've taken that person back… you do have that disconnect and that empathy fatigue…' (CI1, HQ).

These data show that officers can experience what Lennie et al. (2020: 2) describe as 'Diminished Personal Accomplishment – a low sense of personal efficacy', and that such feelings can be psychologically costly. Examples from the observational fieldwork illustrate this emotional strain. On one occasion, a constable shared his frustration after seeing a person without housing reject an offer of accommodation:

> '*There was one time where we'd given someone housing – they wanted accommodation and we found it for them. All they had to do was walk 5 minutes to pick up the keys and they wouldn't do it. They wanted us to bring them the keys because they couldn't be arsed to go themselves… It's hard to believe, and it's so frustrating to watch'* (Whitechurch, 04/04/23).

Similar frustrations surfaced elsewhere:

> *I'm accompanying two constables on a car patrol when we pass a woman walking along the street. One officer says to me, 'that's Holly, you know, the one we've told you about'. The two officers share stories about this person, describing her interactions with the police as 'countless'. They explain that she has 'severe mental health problems', continuously refuses offers of support and creates an extensive level of demand. One states 'She's a drain on public services; she's a drain on our resources… It's annoying to watch someone make things worse for themselves'* (Brookwood, 28/03/23).

Such accounts suggest that the everyday exposures and realities of police work can unsettle whether, and to what extent, officers interpret police 'problems' through a vulnerability lens, with an emphasis on empathy and compassion. While the focus on vulnerability encouraged them to frame 'problem' behaviour as a product of adversity and constrained agency, repeated encounters with emotionally costly situations challenged the consistency with which empathy was expressed. In cases where people were seen to '*make things worse for themselves*' (Brookwood, 28/03/23), a counter-emphasis on individual culpability sometimes surfaced. For example, a PCSO described how her experience had led her to conclude that some people actively 'choose to be vulnerable' (PCSO2, Ashgrove):

> 'Before this role, I saw it as "Oh, bless them"… [but] I think it's the knowledge and experience that makes you understand it a bit better… Yes, they're vulnerable but they choose to be vulnerable … They've had the option to get the help and support to try and stop them from being vulnerable' (PCSO2, Ashgrove).

The examples in this section demonstrate how the emotional toll of police work can shape officers' interpretations of the issues they encounter. Repeated exposure to high-demand individuals, the strain of empathy fatigue and the cumulative frustration of perceived ineffectiveness placed pressure on the extent to which officers could sustain the empathy and compassion encouraged, or rather called for, by the vulnerability lens.

5.2.3. Section summary

This section explored vulnerability as an interpretive lens through which officers reframed police 'problems'. Rather than viewing 'problematic' behaviours as matters of wilful deviance, the focus on vulnerability encouraged officers to understand such conduct as a product of wider social and environmental factors, symptomatic of underlying vulnerabilities often linked to adversity and constrained agency.

Adopting this lens carried particular emotional demands. On one hand, empathy was central to recognising hardship and acknowledging the broader context of people's circumstances. On the other, the emotional toll of police work, shaped by repeated exposure to difficult situations and associated feelings of frustration and fatigue, sometimes made it difficult for officers to sustain empathy and a vulnerability-focused perspective. In this way, the emotional labour of police work involved both expressing empathy and compassion, and managing empathy fatigue, frustration and emotional detachment.

5.3. Situating vulnerability within the neighbourhood policing mandate

So far, the chapter has examined vulnerability as an organisational focus and as a lens for reframing police 'problems'. This section turns to officers' views of vulnerability as a neighbourhood policing priority and considers how they understood their role within an increasingly vulnerability-focused policy landscape. It is divided into two discussions. The first examines the perceived alignments between vulnerability-focused work and neighbourhood policing, while the second considers the tensions between them.

5.3.1. Alignments between vulnerability-focused work and neighbourhood policing

As noted in Section 5.1., officers widely understood vulnerability as a longstanding policing concern, albeit one now marked by a new degree of emphasis and explicitness. In discussions of the purpose and functions of neighbourhood policing, vulnerability was often presented as *especially* central. This perspective was underpinned by three overarching themes, which are examined in this section.

5.3.1.1. The centrality of problem-solving in neighbourhood policing

Officers frequently defined neighbourhood policing as a model premised on identifying and addressing the underlying causes of harm and preventing problems from arising or escalating. In this respect, its remit aligned closely with the problem-solving orientation promoted by vulnerability-focused policing. For example, an inspector described the purpose of

neighbourhood policing as 'understanding the problems behind [issues encountered by the police]' (I3, Whitechurch). Likewise, a sergeant explained:

> 'We are given the time to actually identify the root cause of these problems… We are the problem solvers. We're the ones who resolve things' (S1, Whitechurch).

Observational fieldnotes reflected similar views, with a constable suggesting that:

> '*Our job is about us finding out problems and doing what we can to fix them*' (Whitechurch, 27/02/23).

The idea that neighbourhood, or, more broadly, community, policing delivers problem-orientated policing is well established in both literature and policy (Moore, 1992; Fielding, 1995; HMIC, 2017; Higgins and Hales, 2017; COP, 2018; Higgins, 2018a). As outlined in Chapter Three (3.1.), problem-solving is widely regarded as a prominent component of community policing models. Writing at the inception of modern neighbourhood policing, Quinton and Morris (2008: 3) described the model as 'largely about directing the work of local officers towards the crime and disorder problems… which is closely tied to the idea of problem-solving'. Rogers (2017: 71) similarly identifies one of its core functions as 'dealing with crime and disorder more intelligently'.

Officers frequently framed their role in these terms, emphasising their focus on identifying and addressing the causes of recurring police demand. As one sergeant explained:

> 'Our role is to essentially get upstream of the demand. So, we often find that it's a small minority of people committing the majority of offences... and it's for us to get upstream of that demand and negate it before it really starts to get out of control' (S1, Whitechurch).

Officers also emphasised the problem-solving function of neighbourhood policing by contrasting it with response policing. While the latter was often characterised as wholly reactive and often short-term in its approach, the former was understood as focused primarily on resolving and preventing problems long-term. As a sergeant explained, '*response's job is to respond when something big happens. Ours is to stop the big thing from happening*' (Whitechurch, 27/02/23). Others similarly described response officers as 'firefighters [who] go to put the fire out' (PC7, Ashgrove), while the remit of neighbourhood officers was defined as 'stop[ping] the fires from occurring in the first place' (PC6, Whitechurch). An inspector and sergeant developed this distinction further:

> '[Response officers] are literally a fire brigade... They go out, deal with a job... When you get an issue that's a bit more long term, it's important that you've got a resource

> that you can deploy to that, and that's neighbourhood policing' (I2, Ashgrove). 'Response is: "we'll tape over that wound". Neighbourhoods is: "let's undress it again and actually make sure it's healed… How can we get rid of it and make sure it doesn't come back?"' (S5, HQ).

Such comments echo existing research that positions neighbourhood policing as a preventive model focused on proactive, long-term solutions to local problems (Chapter Three). As a PCSO summarised:

> 'It's having the time to deal with issues individually rather than just… hitting a problem and moving on. It's long-term problem solving' (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

The sense that NPTs had the time required to engage with issues meaningfully and pursue sustained responses, rather than moving quickly between incidents, was reaffirmed by a constable during observational fieldwork who said:

> '*In response, this [*points to radio*] commands your life; there's always someone telling you what to do. It's not like that in neighbourhoods… We can commit our time to sticking with a case till it gets resolved*' (Ashgrove, 01/03/23).

Together, these accounts show how the problem-solving principles and strategies of neighbourhood policing were understood to complement vulnerability-focused work. By directing attention to the underlying causes of local problems and emphasising longer-term solutions, neighbourhood policing was widely positioned by officers as a key site for identifying and addressing the issues that drive police demand.

5.3.1.2. The place-based orientation of neighbourhood policing

As outlined in Chapter Three, NPTs are responsible for defined local areas, enabling them to focus on specific places and the problems that arise within them (Quinton and Morris, 2008; Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015). Higgins (2017; 2018a) argues that the growing emphasis on vulnerability has redirected attention in neighbourhood policing away from its traditional place-based concerns and towards individuals. In this sense, vulnerability-centred priorities may challenge the model's established geographical orientation (Higgins, 2018a: 35).

In this study, however, many officers' accounts did not suggest that the recent focus on vulnerability undermined the traditional place-based orientation of neighbourhood policing. Instead, they widely described this geographical focus as central to how they understood and addressed vulnerability-related issues. Many considered that the model's place-based approach

enabled them to develop a detailed understanding of local problems and the conditions that produced them. This local knowledge was closely linked to problem-solving. For example:

> 'It's about us owning our areas, having a good understanding of what goes on on our patch… You get to understand the problems and your criminals… and you understand what causes the issues in your area. Then you do whatever work you can to tackle that' (PC8, Ashgrove).

> 'If we notice trends or we get reports, we can focus our efforts on a particular area of Brookwood… Neighbourhood cops are great to essentially assess an area… I have the time to look at an area, identify addresses of concern and police it' (PC2, Brookwood).

A sergeant reiterated this perspective through reference to the problem-analysis triangle and the relationship between vulnerability and location:[32]

> '*In any case, you've got victims, offenders and location…. If you take the problem-solving triangle approach…, location is the only one that's fixed so that's a good starting point… NPTs can target hotspots in their area where there's known vulnerability, and that's partly why it [neighbourhood policing] is such a useful resource*' (Ashgrove, 01/03/23).

The perceived link between vulnerability and place reflects literature that situates vulnerability as spatially distributed (Chapter Two, 2.1.3.). Chapter Six (6.2.) examines in more detail how officers defined vulnerability as spatially affected and socially contingent.

As these data indicate, the place-based orientation of neighbourhood policing was seen to generate forms of local knowledge essential to understanding vulnerability. Such knowledge enabled officers to contextualise incidents, recognise recurring patterns and identify where intervention was most needed. This was emphasised by a sergeant reflecting on the early stages of her policing career in Ashgrove, where she was mentored by two experienced PCSOs. The PCSO role was established to enhance police visibility and accessibility within local communities (Chapter Three, 3.3.). Her account suggests that the PCSOs she worked alongside played an important role in identifying and understanding local vulnerability-related issues:

> 'The two PCSOs we had at the time; they literally knew everyone [in Ashgrove]…
>
> One of them… could spot a stolen car or uninsured car or somebody that didn't have a driver's license a mile off… The other knew all the little kids' names – where they

[32] The problem-analysis triangle outlines the main components underpinning crime to inform the analysis of crime and aid the prevention of it. At the most basic level, it identifies the three elements of any crime, represented through the sides of a triangle, as 'location', 'offender' and 'target/victim' (Heinonen, 2013; COP, 2022a).

> lived and which of the schools they went to, and all the drug users, who they were buying from… The amount of knowledge that those two had was insane' (S5, HQ).

Similarly, officers' familiarity and ongoing engagement with members of their local communities were seen as enabling them to recognise and assimilate information about vulnerability-related issues and vulnerable people. As an inspector suggested:

> '[B]ecause the teams are geographically located, they will know the people in their area. They will know Fred Smith lives at this address; "we've been there before. We know about that. We know he's vulnerable because of this"' (I4, HQ).

Another inspector described how accumulated local knowledge could support more nuanced and informed decisions about police priorities:

> 'If we didn't have a neighbourhood team and it was just senior officers looking at stats, they'd say "right, this area is clearly a problem so I need to go and do something about it", whereas I can say "actually that's not a problem for this area. There's a spike there because there's one individual with a very low tolerance for anything contacts us about everything that happens and that skews the figures". Having a neighbourhood team that knows that [and] knows these individuals means that you can more appropriately allocate police resources' (I1, Brookwood).

Elsewhere, a PCSO considered how repeated encounters with members of the 'street cohort' provided critical insight into their backgrounds and how past experiences had shaped their current situations:

> 'The fact that I'm able to work with these people day in, day out, means that I can become more aware of their situations and by doing that, I can see that some come from horrific backgrounds… and for whatever reason, they find themselves on the streets' (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

Similar sentiments arose during observational fieldwork. One constable suggested that, from her frontline position in neighbourhood policing, she was able to '*get access to the wider story because over time I see the things that came before*' (Whitechurch, 25/01/23). Likewise, a PCSO stated:

> '*Doing this job, you get to know people. You learn what they've been through, so you can kind of see why they are where they are and why they're doing whatever they're doing*' (Brookwood, 22/02/23).

As these accounts suggest, officers' proximity to, and opportunities for repeated engagement with, vulnerable individuals enabled them not only to recognise and monitor people's

situations, but also to develop a more detailed and contextualised understanding of them. As Section 5.2. explored, establishing the context behind a situation was central to understanding, diagnosing and addressing problems through a vulnerability lens.

5.3.1.3. The focus on welfare work in neighbourhood policing

Finally, officers understood neighbourhood policing as aligned with vulnerability-related work because of its emphasis on safeguarding and welfare. While helping and protecting vulnerable people were recognised as general police responsibilities, as discussed in Section 5.1, officers frequently described NPTs as particularly well placed to undertake this work. For example, a constable described neighbourhood policing as '*proper policing where you can concentrate on actually helping people*' (Whitechurch, 27/02/23). An inspector similarly suggested that '*you can truly support someone and give them a service in neighbourhoods*' (Brookwood, 19/06/23). Elsewhere, neighbourhood officers were described as 'there to protect somebody who's vulnerable' (PC4, Whitechurch) and as being 'here to keep people safe and reduce vulnerability' (CI1, HQ). This orientation aligned with the principles underpinning community policing models, and indeed British policing more broadly, which position service, support and public welfare as central commitments (Chapter Three).

Where care and welfare were emphasised as core elements of officers' roles, their accounts echoed Brough et al.'s (2016) finding that some officers view policing as a calling rather than simply an occupation. A PCSO captured this ethos succinctly, noting that 'neighbourhood policing is staffed by people who do want to help' (PCSO4, Whitechurch). He reiterated this sentiment when describing his relationship with members of the 'street cohort':

> '[O]ne of the city cohort came and said to me one morning that "you are like our dad and we are your naughty children". And it made me laugh, but after I thought, well, yeah, I'm there to keep them safe… I'm a community support officer and these people are my community and I'm there to support them through thick and thin' (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

As these accounts suggest, officers repeatedly positioned neighbourhood policing as valuable to how the police understand and address vulnerability-related work. As an inspector put it, 'without them [neighbourhood officers], I don't think you can manage vulnerability' (I2, Ashgrove). Such views challenge accounts of community-orientated police work and roles as subsidiary to 'real', i.e. crime-orientated, policing (Chapter Three, 3.1.1.). Instead, they suggest that, for many officers, the welfare and safeguarding functions of neighbourhood

policing were central to its contemporary purpose, especially in a vulnerability-focused landscape.

5.3.2. Tensions between vulnerability-focused work and neighbourhood policing

The previous section established that officers deemed the aims and practices of neighbourhood policing as closely aligned with, and in many respects essential to understandings of and approaches to vulnerability-focused work in SYP. However, this alignment was neither uncontested nor absolute. At times, it was complicated by the practical pressures officers faced, the conditions under which they worked and their senses of the boundaries of their remit.

These tensions fell broadly into two interconnected categories: first, those arising from external pressures linked to public demand; and second, those rooted in officers' understandings of their mandate and the occupational cultures shaping these views. The following explores each in turn.

5.3.2.1. Responding to community demands and expectations

A source of tension between neighbourhood policing and vulnerability-focused work stemmed from the demands and expectations officers felt to be placed on them by their communities. As outlined in Chapter Three, community policing models, including that of neighbourhood policing, are grounded in the premise that police should be responsive to the concerns of local community members. Several officers articulated this ethos. A constable stated, '*We're here to serve our community, 100%*' (Ashgrove, 30/03/23), while a PCSO explained:

> '*It's our job to establish what matters to them [the community] and what's in their best interests, and then do whatever we can to pursue that*' (Whitechurch, 04/04/23).

At times, this duty to respond to community concerns was framed through the principle of policing by consent, which positions police legitimacy as deriving, at least in part, from public acceptance and accountability (Chapter Three, 3.1.). Officers stated that 'We police by consent' (S3, Ashgrove), 'We police you how you want to be policed' (S1, Whitechurch), and 'We are policing by consent, and that's our primary focus' (PC2, Brookwood). Similarly, a PCSO noted during observational fieldwork that '*what we do is directly informed by what the public want from us*' (Ashgrove, 28/06/23). These comments reflect an understanding of policing as

informed by, and responsive to, community concerns and demands (Alderson, 1979; Skogan and Hartnett, 1997).

Responsiveness was understood not only as an end in itself, but also as a means of improving police–public relations and building public confidence, echoing previous scholarship (Tuffin et al., 2006; Quinton and Morris, 2008). As a PCSO explained:

> '*We have to work on improving the public's trust in us… so it's imperative that we listen to their concerns and commit to fixing them best we can*' (Ashgrove, 28/06/23).

Some officers suggested that their attending to community-defined issues largely required reactive forms of work. In this sense, while officers often emphasised the problem-solving focus and proactive nature of neighbourhood policing (5.3.1.1.), they also recognised its reactive dimensions. For example:

> 'If we… are receiving calls from members of the public to say: "This is what's happening, this is what's affecting the community", obviously as neighbourhood cops, we risk assess it, come out and see if that is happening… If we get multiple calls… to say there's anti-social behaviour and crime, you've got no choice but to go and investigate… We're there to try and resolve the issue' (PC4, Whitechurch).

It was this emphasis on responding to communities that revealed possible tensions between neighbourhood policing and vulnerability-focused work. As a chief inspector described, there was scope for divergence between what community members might expect of neighbourhood officers and the work encouraged by organisational strategies and priorities, which have increasingly centred upon matters of vulnerability (5.1.):

> 'When we talk about things that are important to neighbourhoods… it's different in each area… and that might not include vulnerability. It is a priority for the force – protecting vulnerable people – but for a neighbourhood team, their priorities might be ASB, drug dealing, burglary… There is an element throughout all of those that involves vulnerability, but it's not a priority to reduce vulnerability for neighbourhood teams, from a public perspective' (CI1, HQ).

As Section 5.2. established, the focus on vulnerability encouraged officers to look beyond visible symptoms in order to identify and address underlying causes. While officers recognised this approach as conducive to long-term problem-solving, they also acknowledged that it often involved slower-paced work and could produce less immediately visible results. Indeed, a PCSO described how a vulnerability-focused approach often involved '*taking more time*', adding that '*the long-term pay off isn't always that apparent early on*' (Whitechurch, 19/04/23). A sergeant similarly observed:

> '… it might take a bit longer and it might mean a lot more work and you might not get those initial results' (S3, Ashgrove).

By contrast, officers suggested that community concerns typically centred on visible and immediate signs of crime, disorder and antisocial behaviour. Under a duty to respond to these concerns, officers described feeling pressure to focus on visible signals of disorder, rather than their underlying causes. For example, a constable explained that individuals became the 'targets' of police attention 'because they are committing crime' (PC8, Ashgrove), while a PCSO stated that '*our priorities are tackling the antisocial behaviour that plagues our communities*' (Ashgrove, 28/06/23). An inspector similarly emphasised the importance of addressing problematic conduct:

> 'What I try to make clear to my teams… [is that police action]… is about behaviour, about the behaviour of this vulnerability that we cannot have' (I3, Whitechurch).

The emphasis on targeting visible disorder reflects the enduring idea of the police mandate as rooted in maintaining social order (Chapter Two, 2.3.1.). For neighbourhood officers, this often translated into disrupting, controlling and preventing behaviours seen as negatively affecting, or threatening to negatively affect, local communities. It also reinforces the centrality of addressing 'quality of life' issues within community policing models (Willard and Bartgis, 1998: 491; Chapter Three, 3.1.). A sergeant articulated this point in relation to homelessness and the 'street cohort':

> '… we get reports through from members of the public… saying "I've been to the mall and all I can see is beggars" or "I can see street drinkers or druggies who are making it look untidy. Why aren't police doing anything?..."… It's hard to write back to say we're trying to help them when these people actually just want us to scrape them up and chuck them away… [W]e're putting a lot of time and effort in trying to help people, but I don't think that's what people want. I think they think "I just want a Bobby to be a Bobby. I don't want Bobby to be going to meetings trying to help people. I want them to come and kick them away"' (S4, Whitechurch).

This comment illustrates the pressure on officers to address community-defined issues, often centred on visible symptoms of perceived disorder, in ways community members regard as tangible and meaningful. It exposes a potential disjuncture between two orientations within neighbourhood policing: one focused on addressing underlying vulnerabilities through slower and less visible activity, and another driven by community demand for more immediate and visible intervention. As the sergeant's account suggests, vulnerability-focused approaches involving officers 'putting a lot of time and effort in trying to help people' did not necessarily align with 'what [community members] want' (S4, Whitechurch). In a similar vein, a constable

described how long-term vulnerability-focused work could come at the cost of activity more immediately directed towards stopping 'suffering in the community' (PC2, Brookwood):

> 'Rather than saying 'look, these kids are problems, let's get rid of them' so, you know, we do have more of a nurtured way… and sometimes that's bad because it means we don't get quick results, which means people carry on suffering in the community and nothing seems to change' (PC2, Brookwood).

This perception, which resonates with the popular public image of police as principally crimefighters (Reiner, 2010; Loader, 2020), shows how this expectation can come into tension with vulnerability-focused approaches. Officers' sense that community members primarily expected them to tackle crime and disorder, rather than undertake the welfare-orientated tasks that made up much of their work, further reflects wider public misconceptions of policing as primarily crime-fighting (Chapter Three, 3.1.). As an inspector reiterated:

> '[S]omething like 82% of what we deal with is nothing to do with crime. That's a ludicrous statistic. They [the public] would be absolutely mortified' (I2, Ashgrove).

The potential disparity between public expectations and the approaches encouraged by vulnerability-focused policing was also evident in observational fieldwork. For example, a constable stated:

> '*If people are doing things that harm a community and we say "that person needs support. Let's hold their hand, maybe let their behaviour slide a bit because they're vulnerable"… the public would see it as us pandering to them. They don't want that. They want us stopping problems*' (Ashgrove, 30/03/23).

A PCSO similarly highlighted how the expectation for officers to '*tackle what matters to our communities*' (Brookwood, 06/06/23) could contrast with, and possibly come at the expense of, prioritising a vulnerability-focused approach:

> *'We have to tackle what matters to our communities... If you've got kids making some old lady's life hell, whether they [the children] are vulnerable or not, you've got to come down on that behaviour… They [community members] have to see that you're trying to help them'* (Brookwood, 06/06/23).

The emphasis on the public '*see[ing] that you're trying to help them*' (Brookwood, 06/06/23) reflects the pressure on police not only to be effective, but to demonstrate effectiveness (Skolnick, 1966; Reiner, 2010). This also echoes the idea of policing as concerned with upholding social norms and defending the *appearance* of social order in the eyes of the public

(Chapter Two, 2.3.1.). This pressure is particularly pronounced in neighbourhood policing, where many beneficial effects are difficult to measure and evidence, not least because they often do not align with performance metrics that often privilege short-term, quantifiable enforcement outputs such as detections and arrests (Fielding and Innes, 2006; Loftus, 2009; Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015). This can position community-orientated work as less valuable, less important and lower status than activities that produce more measurable outcomes (Chapter Three; Holdaway, 1983; Waddington, 1999).

In this study, several officers highlighted the challenge of demonstrating visibly effective neighbourhood policing. As a PCSO summarised, 'the trouble with neighbourhoods is it's very difficult to see what we've actually done' (PCSO1, Ashgrove). Importantly, some identified the vulnerability-focused aspects of their work as especially difficult to demonstrate and quantify:

> 'If we've gone to a food bank for somebody to get food… or you've had a chat to an old lady for 5 minutes that was feeling very low and vulnerable… [That] can make a world the difference, but where do you write that down?' (PCSO1, Ashgrove).

Another PCSO described similar difficulties in evidencing problem-solving work in the context of tackling antisocial behaviour:

> 'Like one job about antisocial behaviour in an area, we're then going out… we visit 30 addresses on that street, six of which say "yeah, I'm having a real nightmare with kids" and we spend half an hour in each address. Where do you log that? Offering reassurance, gaining that intelligence, building up a bigger picture… All that is a big problem-solving task that we've done... but… where do you record it? Who actually sees the benefit of that?' (PCSO2, Ashgrove).

These accounts indicate that officers faced difficulties in formally recording and evidencing the contribution of certain aspects of their vulnerability-focused work, including reassurance, crime deterrence and the development of deeper understandings of local problems. In this sense, such work was potentially rendered doubly invisible: neither easily captured by organisational performance metrics nor readily recognised by communities as visible and effective police action. This reinforces, and potentially accentuates, familiar concerns about the measurement and recognition of community policing approaches and practices. It also indicates that, while vulnerability-focused work was understood by officers as integral to resolving problems and managing vulnerability (5.3.1.), it remained at risk of being perceived externally as less legitimate or meaningful than more immediately visible, often enforcement-led, interventions.

Officers noted that this invisibility could pose practical problems within a model founded on responsiveness and policing by consent. Research indicates that public confidence is shaped partly by whether citizens feel that police have recognised and effectively addressed their concerns (Quinton and Morris, 2008; Bradford et al., 2009; Rix et al., 2009). Against this backdrop, officers acknowledged that where police activity was not visible to the public, it risked being interpreted as inaction or ineffectiveness. As two constables explained:

> '[F]or whatever crime it is that you or I report, it is important to us… [I]f we don't hear what we want to hear then that may create a negative opinion' (PC1, Ashgrove).

> '*[T]he public get frustrated if don't see us doing what they want us to do… Over time, that inevitably erodes their confidence in us*' (Ashgrove, 30/03/23).

Observational fieldnotes illustrate an example of these dynamics playing out in practice:

> *During a community meeting between local residents, neighbourhood officers and local council staff, several residents have raised concerns about young people riding quadbikes late at night. One frustrated community member says to the NPT inspector 'I've reported it so many times and you've not done anything about it. I've actually stopped phoning it in because nothing ever happens'. The inspector responds, 'I know it can look like nothing's happening, but I can assure you that we are doing things behind the scenes… I appreciate that this isn't what you want to hear but it's going to take us time to fix things'* (Brookwood, 13/04/23).

This exchange demonstrates the challenge of reconciling public demands for immediate, tangible outcomes with the reality of slower and less visible problem-solving work. It also highlights the wider consequences of perceived police inaction. If citizens feel their concerns are unnoticed or unresolved, their willingness to engage with police can decline, as reflected in the resident's comment: '*I've actually stopped phoning it in because nothing ever happens*' (Brookwood, 13/04/23). A PCSO similarly observed that when issues appear to 'rumbl[e] on and on' without police resolution, people may 'think "well, I'm not going to report it because there's not much you can do for me"' (PCSO3, Brookwood).

A breakdown in communication is significant in neighbourhood policing as a model that depends upon sustained engagement between police and public. Where officers' work '*is directly informed by what the public want from us*' (Ashgrove, 28/06/23), disengagement risks weakening the channels through which neighbourhood policing is informed and organised. Maintaining public confidence by responding, and by being *seen to respond*, to community concerns was therefore understood as central to the model's functioning.

This section has shown how community demand and the principles of vulnerability-focused policing can stand in tension. While the former often centres on surface-level issues and calls for prompt and visible police responses, the latter emphasises longer-term, slower and often less visible work. In this way, neighbourhood policing within an increasingly vulnerability-orientated landscape can become a site of competing agendas. This echoes Higgins' (2018a: 3) claim that aspects of vulnerability-focused work can 'sit uncomfortably' alongside traditional community-focused priorities, with the two potentially 'competing for attention and resource'.

How officers negotiated these demands raised important questions about prioritisation and effectiveness. Where community expectations differed from top-down organisational priorities, what constituted a problem, and what counted as effective policing, depended partly on whose definitions officers prioritised. As this section has illustrated, the pressure to meet public expectations and maintain confidence in the police, reinforced by institutional and cultural emphases on visible results, often incentivised officers to prioritise surface-level issues defined by communities. This meant that vulnerability-focused work, with its relative invisibility and delayed '*long-term pay off*' (Whitechurch, 19/04/23), was left at risk of being sidelined.

5.3.2.2. Perceiving vulnerability-focused work as beyond the neighbourhood policing remit

Neighbourhood officers' concerns about their involvement with vulnerability-focused work stemmed not only from their sense of what the public expected of them, but also from their own ideas of what their remit should entail. While vulnerability was widely highlighted as a longstanding neighbourhood policing priority (5.3.1.), many officers also defined their role in narrower terms that emphasised crime control. During interviews, for example, two officers stated:

> 'We're here to look after people, look after property, prevent and detect crime and keep the King's peace' (PC8, Ashgrove)
>
> 'I swore to uphold what is now the King's peace, prevent and detect crime and protect life and limb, and that's what I should do' (I2, Ashgrove).

Similar sentiments surfaced in the observational fieldwork, with two constables saying:

> '*We're there to maintain human rights… and investigate criminal matters… It's not our job to change society… just to police it*' (Brookwood, 09/03/23).

> '*First and foremost, we're here to tackle crime, keep the public safe and protect the functioning of our society*' (Ashgrove, 24/05/23).

Such accounts show how enduring, yet misleading, narratives of police as primarily crimefighters continued to permeate occupational cultures within neighbourhood policing. This echoes research showing that even within community policing models, which explicitly emphasise broader non-crime priorities, officers may still position crime-fighting as the defining feature of their work (Chapter Three, 3.1.; Fielding, 1995; Loftus, 2009).

When officers adopted this crime-focused lens, the legitimacy and appropriateness of their involvement in certain forms of vulnerability-focused work became contested. Several suggested that such work diverted them, or risked diverting them, from what they viewed as their core responsibilities. This appeared to somewhat contradict the view that vulnerability-focused work was central to neighbourhood policing (5.3.1.). As two constables explain:

> '*Sometimes this vulnerability stuff can take us away from what we're actually here to do… I don't care whether people's houses are getting egged. I care if people are being shot*' (Brookwood, 19/04/23).

> *'… we're here to help but we're the police… We're here to prevent and detect crime and protect the public. Our job isn't… giving someone a lift to hospital or being a social worker*' (Whitechurch, 27/02/23).

The tension between responding to vulnerability-focused matters and fulfilling what officers perceived as their intended mandate was expressed clearly by an inspector:

> 'We are mental health nurses, social workers, counsellors, and that's not right… I didn't sign up to be a mental health nurse and a social worker… But that's what you've become. And whenever I'm doing that, I'm not preventing and detecting crime' (I2, Ashgrove).

These accounts echo Skogan's (2008: 26) claim that police officers often prefer to 'do what they signed up for', taken to be primarily crime-orientated work. They also resonate with wider concerns about mission creep and the gradual extension of police responsibilities into areas 'never intended to be within their remit in the first place' (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021: 6; Chapter Two, 2.3.2.).

Importantly, officers' reservations did not amount to an outright rejection of their involvement in vulnerability-focused work. Rather, many suggested that such work could legitimately fall within their responsibilities when it met particular thresholds or contained elements that aligned with their understanding of the police role. Most often, these thresholds concerned

serious harm, immediate risk or a clear criminal dimension. A chief inspector illustrated this when discussing schools contacting the police about pupils' attendance:

> 'Some [schools] will contact us to say they've got a student with poor attendance... There's no information to suggest neglect, serious harm. I'm not sweeping under the carpet the fact that a child out of education has an impact but when it comes to police, we're talking about serious harm or immediate concern' (CI, HQ).

A similar view appeared in discussions of mental health and the conditions deemed as required to justify police involvement:

> 'Crime is regularly committed by people mental health problems which is fine, that's the police ['s responsibility]... we need to be involved in that. If it's just a mental health job, if it's just somebody who's having a mental health breakdown, if they're in their own home and they're no threat to anyone then that's not police matter, is it?' (S2, Brookwood).

These examples illustrate how some officers drew relatively restrictive boundaries around what they considered legitimate and appropriate police work. Yet such restrictive views were not universal. Several officers articulated broader, more holistic conceptualisations of their role, suggesting that their duty of care extended beyond crime-related thresholds to include assisting people in crisis. For example:

> 'End of the day, people are in a crisis… either it's the people who have a mental health issue come to the police for assistance or it's somebody reporting there's a person suffering from mental health. And somebody's life, potentially, could have been in danger. There could be significant harm if we don't do anything positive' (PC7, Ashgrove).

> 'We've got a duty of care when it does come to somebody going through crisis… Doesn't matter what… it's the job, you've got to go out… You've got a duty to go and help, to go and do your job' (PC4, Whitechurch).

These perspectives align more closely with officers' wider descriptions of policing as a form of support for people in need, and with the traditional welfare-orientated dimensions of police work (5.1.; 5.3.1.). The coexistence of relatively restrictive and relatively expansive framings highlights how the boundaries of appropriate police work were unevenly constructed between officers. This reflects wider literature on the unsettled nature of police responsibility in a landscape increasingly focused on vulnerability (Higgins, 2018a; Loader, 2020; Crawford, 2024).

Officers' concerns about the appropriateness of their involvement in vulnerability-related matters were often underpinned by questions of training and expertise. Several identified a mismatch between the capabilities of police and the demands of vulnerability-focused work:

> '… we have to question sometimes what powers we have got to deal with people like that and whether it's for us... Is it for public policing? As a police officer, you are here to prevent and detect crime... That's not what that is... We're not trained to deal with mental health, we're not trained in medical matters' (CI1, HQ).

> 'It's just the fact that we are the police. We are not social workers… we aren't experts [in social care]. We aren't trained in a lot of the issues that we talk about, the issues around vulnerability and that the root causes of them' (I1, Brookwood).

These reflections resonate with Crawford's (2024: 2) argument that, while police are increasingly expected to act as 'thief-catchers, social workers, mental health specialists and nurses', they have a limited set of tools, powers, competencies and capabilities with which to respond to complex social problems. Even among officers who accepted vulnerability as part of their remit, there was a strong emphasis on the limits of what neighbourhood policing could realistically deliver. For example:

> '[W]hen we joined as police officers, you want to help people, whatever circumstance, always. But you also have to accept we're not necessarily the right person to go… It's the challenges within perhaps mental health we cannot answer… [W]here it's around the risk of drug and alcohol [abuse], mental health, we don't have the professional knowledge to address those… Our general role is as a police officer. We're not medical practitioners, we're not trained in drug and alcohol support and intervention' (I3, Whitechurch).

Such concerns indicate a potential gap between the ambitions of neighbourhood policing as a problem-solving model and its capacity to meet the demands of vulnerability-focused work.

Officers also stressed that the issue was not only what police could not provide, but also the risks inherent in what they *did* bring. Several recognised that inappropriate police involvement could escalate situations and exacerbate vulnerability, particularly where officers were deployed to incidents better suited to health or social care professionals. In such circumstances, police intervention was described as potentially 'overkill; it really is overbearing and it's disproportionate to the aim' (CI, HQ). Others similarly noted that police presence – with its symbolic and practical dimensions –could intensify already volatile situations. As two constables observed, '*There are some situations where we can make things worse*' (Whitechurch, 04/04/23) and '*us getting involved can push things up sometimes, make the*

situation more serious' (Ashgrove, 20/04/23). A chief inspector developed this point in relation to mental health crises:

> 'Sometimes we do actually make things worse… [T]he presence of police officers when someone's in mental health crisis can make them feel criminalised and it makes it behave differently. And actually, that could put the[m] at risk' (CI1, HQ)

A constable similarly remarked during the observational fieldwork:

> '*… the uniform can be super triggering… [I]f someone's in crisis, them seeing the police uniform can make things so much worse and just make them spiral more*' (Whitechurch, 15/02/23).

The comment above reflects research on the significance of the police uniform, which shows that while it can signal competence and reliability (Singer and Singer, 1985), it also has the potential to aggravate already fragile situations officers encounter (Mauro, 1984; Simpson and Sergeant, 2025).

Several officers highlighted the possible longer-term implications of police involvement in vulnerability-related matters. As outlined in Chapter Two (2.3.1.), the police bring particular institutional logics, powers and associations that may not always align with welfare-orientated support and may, in some cases, compound harm. This concern is well established in the literature, particularly in relation to the risk of criminalising vulnerability when police and criminal justice agencies become involved in managing social and health-related issues (Dehaghani, 2017; Menichelli, 2019; Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021). Officers in this study were acutely aware of these risks. As a constable and PCSO observed:

> '*There are implications with us getting involved… That can mean someone, a vulnerable person maybe, being brought into the criminal justice system*' (Ashgrove, 01/03/23).

> '*Sometimes we come in and obviously, we might end up arresting a vulnerable person when actually involving a vulnerable person with the criminal justice system can be counterproductive*' (Brookwood, 27/01/23).

These reflections indicate that concerns about the appropriateness and value of police involvement prompted a broader recognition that vulnerability-related issues were not solely, nor necessarily primarily, the responsibility of police. Officers frequently emphasised a pragmatic boundary to their role, acknowledging that 'we're there to try and support everybody, but it's not always the police's responsibility to solve' (PCSO1, Ashgrove), and that 'not every incident [the police encounter] is policing-related' (PC1, Ashgrove). This view was consistently accompanied by recognition that many vulnerability-related issues require

specialist intervention beyond policing. Officers regularly pointed to the need for multi-agency responses, echoing wider policy and academic consensus that effective responses to vulnerability depend on coordinated partnership working (Chapter Two, 2.3.2.). As an inspector and chief inspector stated:

> ‘It’s not rocket science. If somebody has left hospital with a canula in their arm and they’re lacking some capacity… they don't need a police officer; they need an ambulance’ (I2, Ashgrove).

> ‘For what we're asking our neighbourhood officers to do, I would argue that there’s proportionality and justification for having external people to do that because it isn't just for us’ (CI1, HQ).

Chapter Eight returns to this issue by exploring the limits of police intervention in responses to vulnerable people and the role of partnership working in this context.

Overall, the accounts in this section reveal how several officers questioned both the appropriateness of their responsibility for vulnerability-focused work and their capability to carry it out effectively. In practice, vulnerability was sometimes regarded as legitimate neighbourhood police work only when it intersected with crime, serious harm or immediate risk. Where vulnerability-related matters lacked these crime-orientated features, officers were more likely to see them as falling outside their mandate and as diverting them from the core functions they considered themselves ‘*actually here to do*’ (Brookwood, 19/04/23).

5.3.3. Section summary

This section examined how officers interpreted the relationship between neighbourhood policing and vulnerability-focused work. On one hand, the two were widely seen as closely aligned. Officers conceptualised neighbourhood policing as a problem-solving model and emphasised how its place-based orientation and focus on public engagement and local knowledge enhanced their ability to understand and address vulnerability-related issues. On this level, vulnerability was firmly accepted as a priority within the traditional remit of neighbourhood policing.

On the other hand, tensions between vulnerability-focused work and neighbourhood policing also emerged. Officers’ duty to respond to community demands was viewed as sometimes constraining their ability to engage in the longer-term and often less visible work associated with vulnerability. Moreover, narrow, crime-centred understandings of their remit meant that some vulnerability-related matters did not align with officers’ conceptualisations of what their

role should entail. In this sense, the desire for ‘a Bobby to be a Bobby’ (S4, Whitechurch) resonated both with officers’ ideas of public expectations and with their own views of what policing ought to involve. Several officers also stressed that many vulnerability-related issues fell outside their training and expertise and highlighted the potential harms that could arise from inappropriate police intervention.

Taken together, these perspectives highlight the contested and unsettled boundaries of neighbourhood policing in relation to vulnerability. This ambiguity raises important questions about how officers’ understandings of their role, and the tensions within them, translate into practice and shape their responses to vulnerable people. This issue is examined in Chapter Eight.

5.4. Conclusion

This chapter examined officers’ interpretations of vulnerability as a contemporary policing focus and explored how they positioned the mandate and contribution of neighbourhood policing within this landscape.

Officers did not generally view the recent focus on vulnerability as introducing wholly new concerns. Rather, they understood it as formalising issues long familiar to policing and, crucially, as providing a lens through which these issues could be reframed. Many described how this lens enabled behaviours previously categorised as ‘problems’ to be reconceptualised by placing greater emphasis on wider contextual factors relating to environment, adversity and agency. This encouraged officers to redirect attention from a problem’s visible symptoms towards its underlying vulnerability-related causes.

Adopting this interpretive lens required more than a cognitive shift; it also demanded that officers recognise and respond to people empathetically. Yet the conditions of police work, particularly repeated exposure to complex and emotionally taxing situations, could make sustained empathy difficult. As a result, the demands of vulnerability-focused policing appeared to at times challenge officers’ ability to display the very empathy that the vulnerability lens presupposed.

The chapter also showed how officers located vulnerability within the remit of neighbourhood policing. Many viewed the principles and practices of neighbourhood policing as well suited to vulnerability-focused work. At the same time, tensions emerged as officers navigated responsibilities, pressures and beliefs about their role that did not always sit comfortably with this focus. These tensions underscored the uncertain boundaries of neighbourhood policing

and highlighted ongoing disputes over the extent to which vulnerability-related matters constituted appropriate and legitimate neighbourhood policing business.

These insights raise important questions about how officers' interpretations of vulnerability as a neighbourhood policing priority translated into practice. In other words, how vulnerability moved from organisational rhetoric into everyday neighbourhood policing activity. Before examining officers' approaches to identifying and responding to vulnerable people (Chapters Seven; Eight), the next chapter outlines their definitions of vulnerability. This is essential because any exploration of vulnerability in practice must first establish the conceptual foundations on which those practices rest, namely how officers defined the concept itself.

Chapter Six: Definitions of vulnerability in neighbourhood policing

The previous chapter explored how officers interpreted vulnerability as a neighbourhood policing priority and as a lens through which to understand their work and situate their remit. This chapter focuses on officers' constructions of vulnerability itself, examining how they gave meaning to the term. This is important because research has consistently shown that officers' personal and occupational views shape how they conduct their work and, in turn, influence the processes, delivery and boundaries of frontline policing (Loftus, 2010; Reiner, 2010). In the context of vulnerability, how officers define the concept informs which people they recognise as vulnerable, which issues are deemed to warrant attention and which forms of intervention are considered appropriate or necessary (Keay and Kirby, 2018). Examining officers' definitions of vulnerability therefore provides a critical foundation for understanding how they applied and acted upon the concept in the course of their neighbourhood policing work, as explored in Chapters Seven and Eight.

The chapter is organised into three main sections, which together capture the dominant themes in officers' definitions of vulnerability. The first examines how vulnerability was defined in relation to the concepts of risk, incapacity, disadvantage, difference and need.

The second outlines who officers considered vulnerable and the different sources of vulnerability they identified. It examines both the physiological traits seen as rendering certain people vulnerable and the external forces understood to position vulnerability as a situationally mediated condition. This section also highlights how these sources were often understood as interactive and overlapping, with social and environmental conditions often seen to expose or exacerbate people's pre-existing vulnerabilities.

The third section reveals how a caveat emerged across officers' understandings of vulnerability, specifically one that emphasised the difficulty of defining the term due to its temporal potential, broad scope and individually situated and experienced nature. This final part explores how many officers considered the task of defining vulnerability as one that required on-going, context-sensitive and holistic assessments.

6.1. Definitions of vulnerability

SYP subscribes to the COP's (2021) definition which stipulates that 'a person is vulnerable if, as a result of their situation or circumstances, they are unable to take care of or protect themselves or others from harm or exploitation'. Despite the force adopting this definition of

vulnerability, examining how officers themselves defined and applied the term remains imperative, not least because policing is shaped by officers' own interpretive work (Reiner, 2010; Newburn, 2022). In the context of vulnerability, this work allows them to translate an abstract organisational category into practical understandings and on-the-ground assessments about who is considered vulnerable. The significance of such work is emphasised by the ambiguity of the concept. As Chapter Two explored, vulnerability is a complex and contested term that, in the absence of a universally accepted definition, has been variously framed within and across academic, policy and professional contexts (Brown et al., 2017; Gilson, 2024). Policing research similarly finds divergent interpretations of vulnerability among officers working within and across different forces, reaffirming how individualised processes of sense-making and discretionary decision-making characterise frontline practice (HMIC, 2015a; Keay and Kirby, 2018; Briody, 2024). In this study, as this section examines, while several common themes emerged across officers' understandings, so too did some discrepancies. This reveals how the existence of a formal definition within SYP did not eliminate wholly the scope for variation between individual perspectives.

Chapter Two (2.1.1.) demonstrated how vulnerability is commonly given meaning through a 'web of other interrelated concepts' (Gilson, 2021: 87). In this research, though there were differences in the language, emphasis and extent to which they aligned with SYP's formal definition, officers' own definitions of vulnerability consistently drew and centred upon the same cognate concepts of risk, incapacity, disadvantage and need. The following presents these findings.

6.1.1. Defining vulnerability in relation to risk and incapacity

In the literature, vulnerability is regularly depicted as two-sided concept, defined by a heightened exposure to or experience of risk on one hand and a diminished capacity to manage or overcome that risk on the other (Chapter Two; 2.1.1.). This conceptualisation was mirrored in officers' accounts that foregrounded risk as a defining dimension of vulnerability. Quotes taken from observational fieldnotes capturing the words of a constable and a sergeant illustrate this perspective:

> '*[V]ulnerability's ultimately about risk and whether or not you're at risk*' (Ashgrove, 26/01/23).

> '*If someone's at risk of harm, whatever that harm might be – could be from someone else or it could be from themselves – then they're a vulnerable person'* (Whitechurch, 19/04/23).

These comments demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between risk and vulnerability as mutually reinforcing, with the concepts perceived as transacting in such a way that the level of one condition determined the level of the other. The sentiment was expressed explicitly by a sergeant during the observational fieldwork:

> '*With vulnerability, it's just about risk levels. The level of risk you're at shows you your level of vulnerability*' (Brookwood, 22/02/23).

The equating of vulnerability and risk reflected an approach commonly identified in the literature whereby the conditions are used alongside one another and framed as interdependent (Chapter Two, 2.1.1.).

Closely related to the risk-focused conceptualisations of vulnerability were those that referred to the other often cited 'co-ordinate' of vulnerability: incapacity (Watts and Bohle, 1993: 45). Here, vulnerability was generally described in relation to one's inability or diminished ability to protect themselves or other people from harm. As a chief inspector stated in an interview:

> 'For me, vulnerability, if you talk about it in a personal sense, is anyone who can't protect themselves or others from being exploited or otherwise' (CI1, HQ).

Some officers situated incapacity as a key dimension of vulnerability not only in terms of one's general ability for self-protection but also their specific capacity to make decisions that promoted their personal safety. Comments from a sergeant and an inspector illustrate this articulation:

> 'It's… somebody who finds themselves in a situation where they aren't able to protect themselves, make decisions for themselves or they aren't in a position where they're particularly going to be safe' (S1, Whitechurch).

> '[Vulnerable] people [are those] who by virtue of their own experience are unable to protect themselves… [T]hey're not able to make informed decisions about their safety' (I3, Whitechurch).

Where vulnerability was defined in terms of protection and safety, as exemplified above, officers' interpretations both highlighted insecurity and reinforced risk as central dimensions of vulnerability (Chapter Two, 2.1.1.). They also aligned with SYP's definition of vulnerability, echoing in particular the notion that a vulnerable person is definable through the inability 'to take care of or protect themselves or others from harm or exploitation' (COP, 2021).

Moreover, the idea that vulnerability can be signalled through a person's limited ability to make 'informed decisions' (I3, Whitechurch) reinforces the perceived connection between vulnerability and constrained agency. As Chapter Five (5.2.1.) explored, interpreting 'problem'

behaviour through a vulnerability lens encouraged officers to question assumptions that offenders are wholly culpable for their actions. The accounts here reflect a related but converse dynamic: whereas in some cases vulnerability was used to *explain* reduced agency (Chapter Five), officers' definitions of vulnerability itself positioned it as a condition as *arising from* diminished capacity. Taken together, these perspectives might indicate an understanding of a mutually reinforcing cycle between vulnerability, constrained agency and, by extension, reduced responsibility or culpability.

Alongside conceptualisations of vulnerability in terms of risk exposure or limited capacity for self-protection, some officers described it in more affective and experiential terms. Specifically, several framed vulnerability as a condition related to emotional or psychological strain arising from an inability to cope with personal circumstances. As a sergeant and PCSO suggested:

> 'Vulnerability, for me, is someone who is at a point in a life - whether that be physically, mentally, emotionally – … [where] everything is just getting a little bit on top [of them]' (S4, Whitechurch).

> '*I guess [vulnerability] is your ability to cope… and whether you can cope with what life throws at you'* (Whitechurch, 12/07/23).

The focus on one's ability to '*cope with what life throws at [them]'* (Whitechurch, 12/07/23) denotes an interpretation of vulnerability in terms of resilience. As noted Chapter Two (2.1.1.), a close relationship between vulnerability and resilience is often observed in the literature, with the former regularly defined in accordance with one's ability to anticipate risk, weather hardship and cope with adversity.

These data demonstrate officers' constructions of vulnerability in terms of risk and incapacity. The consistent emphasis on the related notions of harm, protection, safety and functional capacity reflected the prominent themes not only among academic conceptualisations but also those encompassed in SYP's definition. In such cases, notwithstanding some variation in language and emphasis, officers' own framings broadly reflected that adopted by the force.

6.1.2. Defining vulnerability in relation to disadvantage, difference and need

Many officers' definitions of vulnerability also drew upon the concepts of disadvantage, difference and need. These understandings typically situated vulnerability as a condition marked by deprivation and scarcity. For example, a constable stated during the observational fieldwork:

> '*Vulnerability can happen when you've got less – less money, less access to stuff, less opportunities, less whatever*' (Brookwood, 08/06/23).

During an interview, another constable similarly suggested that a vulnerable person could be defined by their 'lack of resources [and] lack of options' (PC5, Whitechurch).

Some officers described vulnerability through exemplar conditions of visible and material hardship. One expressed how she would infer conditions of vulnerability in the context of, for instance, 'somebody's [who] not got food or carpet' (I3, Whitechurch). Likewise, a PCSO stated:

> '[If] they've got no heating on and it's really cold... I mean they're obvious signs of vulnerabilities… If the cupboard's absolutely empty then they're obviously struggling' (PCSO1, Ashgrove).

Where deprivation and insufficiency were emphasised as key dimensions of vulnerability, officers' definitions illuminated the scope for the concept to be framed as a negative state characterised by 'unpower', weakness and deficiency (Harrison, 2008: 427; Fawcett, 2009; Brown, 2011). Such interpretations resonated with Bartkowiak-Théron and Asquith's (2012: 43) contention that the term 'vulnerable people' may have developed as the contemporary substitute description for 'disadvantaged members of society'. They also reflected Paterson and Best's (2015: 150) observation that vulnerability is widely conceptualised through 'deficit frameworks' that emphasise marginalisation (Chapter Two).

Often, conceptualisations of vulnerability in terms of deprivation and disadvantage assumed a comparative perspective, positioned as relative rather than absolute and situated against the 'majority of the population' (PC5, Whitechurch). For example:

> 'I take vulnerability to mean people that can't look after themselves in the same way that perhaps the majority of the population can… so I guess [it comprises] people that are at a huge disadvantage' (PC5, Whitechurch).

The framing of vulnerability as a relative state essentially positioned vulnerable people as those who did not simply lack capacity and resources *per se*, but rather those that lacked the same capabilities and means that would ordinarily be expected of, or available to, the wider population. Hence, vulnerability was defined as a condition of difference and exceptionality, with officers describing accordingly vulnerable people as '*the minority in society*' (Brookwood, 22/02/23) and '*those few that struggle*' (Whitechurch, 14/04/23).

Where vulnerable people were situated as a distinct minority, officers' understandings aligned with a situational perspective of vulnerability and thus contrasted with the theoretical approach

of universal vulnerability (Chapter Two, 2.1.2.). As Chapter Two explored, while considerable traction has been gained by the universal perspective across academia, it has also been criticised for lacking practical applicability (Hurst, 2008; Rogers et al., 2012; Kohn, 2014). Officers in this study tended to share similar concerns, rejecting the universal perspective on the view that it was impractical and overly expansive. For example, a chief inspector claimed that 'you could also go too far, to the Nth degree, where everyone could be vulnerable' (CI, HQ). Moreover, a constable suggested, '*It wouldn't be that helpful if you just said everyone was [vulnerable]'* (Ashgrove, 20/03/23). In fact, only one officer in the study articulated an understanding of vulnerability as universal and, still, he too indicated the value of selective applications of vulnerability:

> 'Everyone is vulnerable in their own particular way… but I think it's a terminology we can use to define certain communities… or certain offences against certain people' (PC1, Ashgrove).

This perspective acknowledges a duality of vulnerability, accepting that, as Cole (2016) suggests, 'all of us are vulnerable, but some are more vulnerable than others' (Chapter Two, 2.1.2.). Yet the fact that no further officers expressed an acknowledgment of vulnerability as universal reaffirmed the predominant perspective of it as a relative state whereby vulnerable people were considered a distinct group, distinguishable from the wider population.

Definitions that affiliated vulnerability with disadvantage occasionally highlighted the notion of need as a further defining dimension. The link between vulnerability and need was identified when officers positioned disadvantaged people who were unable to cope independently, i.e. vulnerable people, as requiring external support. For example, vulnerable individuals were described as those who 'need a bit of help' (PC8, Ashgrove) and those who 'need more help' (S4, Whitechurch). Comments captured in the observational fieldnotes reiterate the defining of vulnerability in terms of need for support, as suggested by the words of a PCSO and an inspector:

> '*… for a lot of these vulnerable people, they can't manage on their own. They need outside help and that bit of support from elsewhere*' (Whitechurch, 14/04/23).

> '*I guess you could see it [vulnerability] as simply the need for more support and assistance and having that dependency'* (Brookwood, 27/01/23).

Through the lens of need, vulnerability was essentially positioned as a mechanism by which cases involving vulnerable people could be cast as the priority. As a constable described:

> 'You can kind of prioritise or categorise vulnerability' (PC1, Ashgrove).

This perspective reflected social policy approaches that conceptualise vulnerability as a signal of priority need (Dunn et al., 2008; Brown, 2011; Rogers et al., 2012). For example, HMIC (2015: 23) defines vulnerability as a 'condition of a person who is in need of special care, support or protection because of age, disability or risk of abuse or neglect'. Chapter Two explored how this framing can facilitate the mobilisation of vulnerability as an operational tool and a trigger for intervention by which those most in need can be identified, prioritised and assisted. Echoing this understanding, an inspector explained how positioning vulnerability as a state of need allowed it to direct police attention towards the most important cases:

> '… *we've got to focus our attention somewhere, like we have to figure out where we're most needed and obviously, it's vulnerable people who need help the most*' (Brookwood, 22/02/23).

An interesting dimension to this comment is the presumption of a clear relationship between need and police intervention, and the framing of that relationship as both positive and logical. Chapter Two (2.3.1.) highlighted how police practice can, in some circumstances – particularly those involving marginalised groups – create or intensify vulnerability rather than alleviate it. Moreover, as outlined in Chapter Five (5.3.2.), officers themselves recognised that the conditions, parameters and capacities of policing do not always align neatly with the demands of vulnerability-focused work. Thus, interpreting vulnerability as signalling the need not just for help, but for *police* help specifically, risks glossing over the tensions between the needs associated with vulnerability and the limits of what police work can realistically or appropriately deliver. As Chapter Two (2.3.2.) set out, effective responses to vulnerability require more than police intervention alone; partnership working has long been understood as critical to such work. Chapter Eight (8.4.) returns to this point to examine how multi-agency collaboration contributed to officers' responses to vulnerable people.

6.1.3. Section summary

This section illustrated how officers defined vulnerability in relation to other key concepts. A degree of consistency emerged as definitions often drew upon similar and related dimensions and conditions. Of these other concepts, risk and incapacity were highlighted primarily at a conceptual level, while the identified links between vulnerability and relative disadvantage, difference and need were often underpinned by a more practical perspective that positioned vulnerability as an operational focus for policing. This revealed the preference for a situational, rather than a universal, framing of vulnerability, on the understanding that it allowed the concept to be used to distinguish between levels of need and inform policing decisions about

resource allocation (Chapter Two; Hurst, 2008; Kohn, 2014). Hence, vulnerability was defined not only as a descriptive category but also as an organising mechanism and a potential basis for intervention.

6.2. Defining who is vulnerable and recognising different types of vulnerability

The previous section revealed how vulnerability was virtually exclusively framed by officers as a situational condition experienced by certain people, rather than universal one shared by everyone. Chapter Two (2.1.3.) identified how situational drivers of vulnerability are commonly organised within the literature under two broad categories: personal attributes and external forces.

Across officers' accounts, both personal and social factors were named as contributing to vulnerability. This section first outlines former, establishing the individual physiological traits officers most often associated with vulnerability. Second, their understandings of vulnerability as socially mediated and contingent are examined. Importantly, as Section 6.2.2. presents, officers' accounts did not position these perspectives as mutually exclusive but rather viewed them as overlapping and mutually reinforcing on the understanding that pre-existing vulnerabilities could be exposed and compounded through external forces and conditions.

6.2.1. Associating vulnerability with certain physiological traits

The range of physiological factors officers affiliated with vulnerability reflected those routinely highlighted within the literature (Chapter Two, 2.1.3.). For example, gender was framed as an indicator of inherent vulnerability, with women described as naturally more vulnerable than men (PC7, Ashgrove; CI1, HQ). Other officers associated vulnerability with highlighted factors relating to 'ethnicity, sexuality, religion, race' (S2, Brookwood), 'medical condition[s]' (I4, HQ), disabilities and mental health issues (I1, Brookwood; PC7, Ashgrove). Age was also repeatedly cited as a key determinant of vulnerability, with both older people (S2, Brookwood) and young people (I3, Whitechurch; CI1, HQ) described as especially vulnerable. In the case of the latter population, a constable stated:

> 'The younger you are, the more vulnerable you are' (PC7, Ashgrove).

Keeping with the example of young people, some officers framed this group's vulnerability in biological terms, linking it to a lack of cognitive development. For instance:

> '… these are people that aren't fully developed… their brains are still developing' (I1, Brookwood).

This perspective reiterates Francis-Oliviero et al.'s (2023: 3318) research that notes how young people's vulnerability is often conceptualised in terms of their 'brain immaturity [and] their fragile emotional and behavioural balance'.

Officers also considered how experiential factors, specifically the limited life experience and impaired abilities to assess and manage risk that typically accompanies young age, could reinforce the inherent vulnerability of youths. As an inspector said:

> 'There's vulnerability due to age… [T]hey've not got life experience, they've not grown up, so there's risk with that' (I4, HQ).

A sergeant described how these physiological attributes could manifest in young people making choices and acting in ways that might put them at risk:

> 'They think it's cool to carry a knife or carry a firearm or… be part of a gang… [B]eing, as they quote, "a bad man" is probably putting themselves in the most vulnerable spot that they could possibly put themselves in… They don't think they are. They think they're on top of the world' (S4, Whitechurch).

These interpretations aligned with the literature that frames young people as inherently vulnerable due to their relative developmental immaturity and reduced capacity for self-protection (Morgan and Zedner, 1992; James and Prout, 1997).

In addition to young people, the 'street cohort' was widely recognised as an inherently vulnerable group; its members were described as 'all hav[ing] some level of vulnerability' (I3, Whitechurch) and 'ha[ving] very, very complex needs and vulnerabilities' (S1, Whitechurch). Officers consistently associated this group's innate vulnerability with a prevalence of mental health issues, most notably in relation to high levels of substance use and dependency. Echoing the literature that highlights the prominence of such challenges among this population (Moore, 2008; MIPO, 2015; Normore et al., 2016), two officers stated:

> 'I can quite categorically say that 93% of the people that we've got sleeping rough on the streets of Whitechurch suffer from an addiction problem, whether it be alcohol or drugs' (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

> '… their vulnerabilities lie in a lot of different areas. Mental health, "isms" like alcohol, drugs…' (S4, Whitechurch).

The examples in this section illustrate officers' framings of certain groups as vulnerable by virtue of certain physiological traits. In such cases, vulnerability was understood as, at least in

part, 'be[ing] down to individual characteristics' (I1, Brookwood). However, many also emphasised how 'circumstantial factors' (PC8, Ashgrove) could also create and contribute to vulnerability, as the next section explores.

6.2.2. Understanding vulnerability as a socially affected and mediated condition

Where officers did not conceive vulnerability to be driven exclusively by certain personal traits, it was understood as a condition shaped considerably by situational factors deriving from specific environments and situations. One sergeant described how he focused on broader circumstantial forces, rather than an individual's physiological traits, when interpreting vulnerability:

> '[N]owhere do we just say they're vulnerable just because they are… It's situational vulnerability' (S2, Brookwood).

Several officers posited that vulnerability could be created, reinforced and realised through the way in which external forces interact with personal factors. As a constable articulated:

> 'There are pre-existing factors… and there are circumstantial factors… [If] somebody has underlying mental health issues… that might make them slightly more vulnerable than somebody else in society. And you then put that in with situational factors… - who they live with, who they come across… - and that then leads into vulnerability' (PC8, Ashgrove).

The notion that vulnerability could emerge through the interplay between personal and environmental factors was reiterated by another officer:

> '[Y]ou can be, by default, more vulnerable because of who you are *and* where you are' (PC1, Ashgrove).

Such accounts position vulnerability as socially affected rather than purely inherent, influenced by one's environment and their interactions with external conditions. This reflects a more holistic and pluralistic approach to vulnerability that emphasises its situational socially mediated nature (Chapter Two, 2.1.4.). Young people were frequently used to illustrate this understanding. While youths were widely framed as inherently vulnerable (6.2.1.), officers also often noted how this group's vulnerability was susceptible to being shaped, compounded and realised through social factors. For example, an inspector described how vulnerability among this group was often informed by socioeconomic conditions:

> '… there's almost always some… socio-economic deprivation and standards of living and things like that that put the kids… into said levels of vulnerability' (I1, Brookwood).

The same officer went on to describe how the risks associated with children's inherently limited life skills and experience could be amplified by their social environment and upbringing:

> 'When a child is growing up in a set of circumstances where that [crime and ASB] is their normal… [they won't] necessarily understand that wider society might see that as not in keeping with the rules…' (I1, Brookwood).

This perspective aligned with scholarship contending that because young people's brains are typically more dependent and susceptible to influence than those of adults, their exposure to negative experiences means that their vulnerability can be acutely 'reinforced by a disadvantaged social context' (Francis-Oliviero et al., 2023: 3318; James et al., 1998).

The scope for young people to be influenced socially was also recognised in the context of cultural and technological change, with one constable suggesting that technology could enhance young people's vulnerability by altering their personal expectations and values. As he described:

> *'… now, kids have got access to everything. They see the lives of other people and they're not happy with their bog-standard lives… Some of them think working hard is the worst thing ever from what they see. They'd rather get on a quad [bike] and rob a house… Technology had desensitised people to normal, achievable goals in life, especially kids… And that can encourage them to get pulled into risky situations where they're committing crime and disorder…'* (Brookwood, 09/03/23).

Such data relay a perspective of young people's vulnerability as not shaped by personal or social factors in isolation; rather, these forces were understood as interacting and reinforcing one another. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that youth's vulnerability emerges through an interplay between individual characteristics and structural conditions, which together can, for example, amplify this group's exposure to harm and their susceptibility to exploitation and victimisation (Brown, 2015; Hallett, 2016; Ivanich and Warner, 2019). It also reinforces officers' understandings of young people as generally less autonomous than adults (Chapter Five, 5.2.1.)

A similar logic was applied in the context of the 'street cohort'. While addiction and mental ill-health were framed as physiological vulnerabilities (6.2.1.), officers explained how these

traits often heightened the extent to which this group was at risk of being victimised and/or harmed by external sources. As a sergeant and constable explained:

> '… because they took so much alcohol or drugs… they can be a victim of pretty much anything: exploitation, crime... There's so many different things' (S4, Whitechurch).

> '[T]hey can be preyed upon in a variety of different ways… [P]eople that were drug users… are open to be preyed upon [by drug dealers] for maybe: "if you go and do X, Y and Z, we will supply you with your drug of choice"' (PC6, Whitechurch).

These perspectives aligned with the research highlighting the inherent risk often involved in street lifestyles, not least through their association with increased exposure to victimisation and dangerous activities (MIPO, 2015; Normore et al., 2016; Ivanich and Warner, 2019).

Developments in broader social conditions were also identified as compounding vulnerability levels among the 'street cohort'. A PCSO exemplified this with an account of previous changes in drug markets, specifically the emergence and greater availability of new harmful substances:

> 'When I first joined [in 2008], they [the 'street cohort'] would drink alcohol or take heroin and crack… Then spice and the new psychoactive substances all came in and… a lot of them switched... They were going from [spending] £300 a day to £8.90… [T]he vulnerability of that was they could afford more of it' (I4, HQ).[33]

Where officers recognised that vulnerability could arise from an interaction between individuals' internal traits and their external environments, they highlighted the 'cross-sectional' and multifaceted character of its conditions (Bartkowiak-Théron and Asquith, 2012: 46). These perspectives further echoed a pluralistic framing of vulnerability, situating the concept as layered and contextualised, shaped by the complex interplay of manifold factors (Chapter Two, 2.1.4.).

Understandings of vulnerability as socially affected and relational were most dominant in officers' portrayals of ethnically minoritised communities. Specifically, vulnerability among these groups were attributed overwhelmingly to their minority status and social position rather than any inherent traits. As a constable and inspector suggested:

> 'They're quite a small group and therefore ultimately they can be more likely to be quite vulnerable against the general population, due to the ratio' (PC7, Ashgrove).

[33] Spice is a drug that mimics the effects of cannabis by attaching itself to the same brain receptors. It effects including feelings of euphoria, sedation and altered perception. However, spice is significantly stronger than marijuana and is considered more dangerous. Information available at: https://springhillrecovery.com/what-is-spice/ (accessed 04/05/24).

> ‘It’s not necessarily about them having a vulnerability as such… it’s that they are vulnerable by the fact they’re in a minority group in a largely white society’ (I1, Brookwood).

In a similar vein, members of ethnically minority communities were deemed ‘vulnerable… by definition’ on the basis that they were more likely to be ‘targeted just for being who [they] are’ (S3, Ashgrove). Chapter Two outlined scholarship suggesting that non-whiteness can be interpreted as signalling difference within westernised societies and can therefore expose those from ethnically minoritised communities to certain ethnicity- and/or race-related risk. Echoing this perspective, a constable expressed:

> ‘… you could be vulnerable purely for where you live or rent, so not because of who you are as an individual but because you are as a part of that community or society group’ (PC1, Ashgrove).

A PCSO considered the relationship between location and vulnerability in the predominantly ethnically white area of Brookwood (Chapter Five, 5.3.2.1.). He suggested that this demographic makeup increased vulnerability among ethnically minoritised groups in the area:

> ‘In this area [ethnically minoritised groups] are [vulnerable] because obviously it's an area where people seem to be afraid or… they don't like anything different, anything that they perceived to be different from them’ (PCSO3, Brookwood).

Another constable connected vulnerability to place in the locality of Ashgrove, describing how the area’s relatively high deprivation levels could exacerbate its residents’ exposure to risk, harm and vulnerability (Chapter Five, 5.3.2.2.):

> ‘… [Ethnically minoritised communities] are very susceptible to people taking advantage of an area which has got very cheap housing, drug users, known criminals in the area… That's what makes them vulnerable. It's more the fact that they're sort of victims of the location of the area itself rather than what specifically they do’ (PC8, Ashgrove).

A sergeant reiterated the perceived relationship between place and vulnerability in the broad context of South Yorkshire. Specifically, he considered how the county’s socio-economic conditions correlated with the levels of threat and risk within it:

> ‘For a little county there's a lot of poverty in this county... It is one of the poorer counties in the country… we do carry a quite significant bit of threat and risk’ (S4, Whitechurch).

These accounts illustrate how officers constructed vulnerability as shaped by, and embedded within, the social and economic conditions of certain neighbourhoods. This understanding aligns with literature emphasising the relationship between place and vulnerability (Chapter Two, 2.1.3.). As outlined in Chapter Five (5.3.1.), viewing vulnerability in this way was seen to make neighbourhood policing, given the model's place-based orientation, particularly well-suited to recognising vulnerability-related issues.

Further situational dimensions of vulnerability that officers highlighted included social isolation and unfamiliarity with the surrounding environment. For example, officers described members of ethnically minoritised communities as 'vulnerable in th[e] sense that they feel isolated' (S4, Whitechurch) and identified how 'their loneliness is a huge vulnerability' (PC5, Whitechurch). The specific challenge of language barriers, for instance, was raised as an environmentally derived source of vulnerability common among those from ethnically minoritised backgrounds. As two officers considered:

> 'If somebody doesn't speak the language… you're intrinsically fearful because you don't know how to communicate' (I3, Whitechurch).

> '…not being able to speak English is such a massive vulnerability because… when you need help off someone, you can't ask for it' (S5, HQ).

An unfamiliarity with local contexts was also perceived to enhance vulnerability in terms of a heightened risk to exploitation; indeed, an officer described ethnically minoritised community members as especially 'vulnerable to exploitation' due to their potential lack of experience or knowledge of the area in which they reside (PC8, Ashgrove). A sergeant described this in terms of this group being more vulnerable to predation by, for instance, drug dealers:

> '[T]hings existed over here that didn't exist over there… Where they are from, they didn't have heroin and crack cocaine… so a lot of them were preyed upon when they came over… It was literally like shooting fish in a barrel for the drug dealers, like: "Oh try this. You can be my friend. You're new to this. I'll show you this, I'll show you that". It's almost like a form of grooming' (S5, HQ).

Taken together, these accounts reveal how officers widely understood vulnerability as not solely an individual attribute or fixed personal condition but socially produced and situationally mediated, emerging through the interaction between personal characteristics, lived experiences and wider environmental conditions. This highlights the importance of examining vulnerability not only in terms of who someone is, but also in relation to the social conditions and situations in which they exist.

6.2.3. Section summary

This section illustrated how officers understood vulnerability both in relation to certain physiological attributes and as a socially affected condition. They tended to place greater emphasis on the latter, constructing vulnerability as contingent and shaped by forces external to individuals. Risk, disadvantage and exposure to harm were therefore seen as strongly influenced by specific environments and by people's experiences within them. By locating vulnerability in the relationship between social circumstances and individual characteristics, officers presented its emergence and manifestations as uneven between people and places, and shifting across time and space. From this perspective, attempts to define vulnerability through fixed, stable or group-based categories become complicated and potentially flawed. This issue is examined in the next section.

6.3. The challenges of defining vulnerability

Though officers consistently affiliated vulnerability with certain traits and circumstances, a simultaneous unease with framing vulnerability in such uniform ways also emerged across the data. This concern regarded the challenges and potential flaws of attaching vulnerability as a fixed descriptor of particular identities. Three main themes surfaced across officers' explanations that situated vulnerability as resistant to categorisation. The following considers each of these in turn.

6.3.1. The temporal potential of vulnerability

Officers highlighted the difficulty of categorising vulnerability in part due to its susceptibility to change. Many noted that it should not be understood as a fixed or permanent condition, but as something that can fluctuate in response to life events and changing circumstances. For example, a chief inspector identified how vulnerability 'could be temporary; it could be permanent' (CI1, HQ). The dynamic nature of vulnerability was similarly highlighted in comments such as 'people's vulnerability [may] change' (PCSO4, Whitechurch) and 'people can go in and out of vulnerability' (I4, HQ).

Such framings situate vulnerability as contingent rather than fixed, shifting in response to specific experiences and circumstances. Two inspectors reiterated the interpretation of vulnerability's potential to fluctuate at different moments in accordance with the ubiquitous scope for situations to change:

> ‘Somebody that wouldn’t… [otherwise] be vulnerable can become vulnerable by their dispositions [or] a particular set of circumstances’ (I1, Brookwood).

> ‘Vulnerability can pop up from different areas… If [someone is] in crisis at that moment then they’re vulnerable. But when they’re not, they’re probably not [vulnerable]’ (I4, HQ).

Such accounts resonate with the situational emphasis embedded in the definition adopted by SYP which acknowledges how vulnerability can emerge ‘as a result of [a person’s] *situation or circumstances*’ (COP, 2021, emphasis added). These perspectives also aligned with the literature that identifies the temporal potential of vulnerability (Chapter Two, 2.1.3.; 2.1.4.). Two sergeants also flagged the mutability of vulnerability by explaining how a vulnerable person’s ability to cope with their vulnerability can change:

> ‘[Someone] might be vulnerable, but they might be able to deal with it really well. But I think you've got to keep an eye on those people because they can quite quickly slip down…’ (S4, Whitechurch).

> ‘*It can just happen where one minute they’re completely fine and the next they’re suddenly not*’ (Whitechurch,12/07/23)

Conceptualisations that emphasised the temporal potential of vulnerability indicated it as something that required continual assessment, rather than being definitively and permanently ascribed (Menichelli, 2019; Gilson, 2024). Chapters Seven and Eight examine how such perceptions shaped officers’ approaches to identifying and responding to vulnerable people.

6.3.2. The capacious scope of vulnerability

The second reason offered to explain the difficulty of imposing categorisations of vulnerability concerned its broad and multifaceted nature. Officers repeatedly pointed to the extensive diversity of its sources, forms and influencing factors, arguing that this rendered the concept ‘really hard to specify’ (S4, Whitechurch) and ‘a tough one [to define] because it could mean so many different things’ (I1, Brookwood). Similarly, a PCSO considered how vulnerability ‘comes in all shapes and sizes’ (PCSO4, Whitechurch) and a sergeant noted that ‘There’s hundreds of reasons why people can become vulnerable’ (S2, Brookwood).

For some, recognitions of the expansive forms of vulnerability were a relatively novel development, having become more inclusive in recent times. An inspector and a sergeant made

this point by contrasting the current approach against the narrower classifications of vulnerability that existed previously:

> ‘Before it'd have been “you’re disabled” or ”you’ve got something”. It was quite stringent, whereas now we’re more holistic, looking at it from everywhere’ (I4, HQ).

> ‘Vulnerability in the old days used to be “they’re suicidal and that’s that” whereas now it's alcoholism, gambling, drugs – so many different things’ (S4, Whitechurch).

Officers’ accounts echoed a central point in the literature, as outlined in Chapter Two (2.1.), that highlights vulnerability as a broad and difficult concept to delimit. Yet rather than treating this indeterminacy as an obstacle, some officers understood it as practically useful. The absence of a narrow definition appeared to allow them to recognise vulnerability across varied people, situations and forms of need. Indeed, a sergeant actively cautioned against ‘put[ting] a label on [vulnerability]’ (S4, Whitechurch), while an inspector similarly explained

> ‘[F]or me, you can't narrow down [vulnerability] to something. You've got to take it as a whole’ (I4, HQ).

During the observational fieldwork a PCSO reiterated:

> ‘*Trying to define vulnerability is made difficult by the fact that it could literally mean anything. All sorts of things fall under the umbrella of “vulnerability” so automatically that makes it hard to define*’ (Brookwood, 22/02/23).

Chapter Two outlined how vulnerability has often been conceptualised in academia and social policy through fixed descriptors and categorical classifications. It considered the limitations of this approach and the increasing calls for a shift towards more flexible and holistic understandings of vulnerability (Luna, 2009; Menichelli, 2019; Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021). This section revealed points of convergence between this scholarship and this study’s findings. Officers’ recognitions of the breadth and complexity of vulnerability sometimes prompted them to caution against narrow or overly prescriptive definitions of the term, instead advocating for more expansive and flexible interpretations that accommodated its capacious scope.

6.3.3. Vulnerability as individually situated and experienced

The final theme in officers’ understandings of vulnerability as resistant to categorisation related to how it could manifest in heterogenous ways between different people and contexts. For instance, officers described how vulnerability ‘varies massively on the situation’ (PC3,

Whitechurch) and 'It's so circumstance-dependent…' (I1, Brookwood). Likewise, a constable suggested:

> '… *[T]o some degree the definition [of vulnerability] depends on who's describing it… I guess people wouldn't always necessarily agree on what it means*' (Whitechurch, 27/02/23).

These interpretations reflected the scholarly consensus of vulnerability as an ambiguous concept, capable of holding different meanings in different contexts and according to different people, as (Chapter Two; Gilson, 2014; 2024; Chuna and Garrafa, 2016). This perspective was reaffirmed by the several officers who explicitly stressed how measures and experiences of vulnerability varied fundamentally between situations, depending on who was being affected and the particulars of the surrounding circumstances. It was on this basis that a chief inspector considered vulnerability to require case-by-case readings, stating 'It's every circumstance on its own merits' (CI1, HQ).

The interpretation of vulnerability as uniquely experienced and directed by the specificities of individual cases is echoed in the following excerpt drawn from fieldnotes. They capture a constable's account of an elderly person who lived on a street where a group of young people regularly congregated.

> *'It's not necessarily that [the young people] were doing anything criminal as such but that kind of ASB can intimidate people. It intimidated her.... She'd avoid leaving the house because she was so scared… One person's ASB is another person just having a laugh. I always think it's very contextual… [Vulnerability] rests on the individual… It rests on personality and circumstance'* (Ashgrove, 20/03/23).

A similar case, described by a PCSO, involved an elderly woman who considered her life to have been 'ruined' (PCSO3, Brookwood) by repeated antisocial behaviour committed by a group of local youths:

> '[A]t the time, if you were to ask her, she'd say her life had been ruined by it. And a lot of it were not actually criminally enforceable, like not criminal damage and things, but it's just every day… It'd come to a point where I think she had a fear of going outside… After 6 o'clock she told me she wouldn't go to the local shop and things anymore. It's almost like… them kids are like the playground bully' (PCSO3, Brookwood).

These accounts highlighted how vulnerability was understood as shaped not only by an individual's specific experiences and circumstances but also, crucially, by their own *interpretation* of those circumstances. This reaffirmed the need to understand vulnerability '*on*

a case-by-case basis' (Ashgrove, 20/03/23) and reiterated the challenge of defining such a subjective and context-dependent condition.

The sense of vulnerability as individually experienced was underscored by officers' recognition that the experiences of individuals within groups generally considered vulnerable were not necessarily homogenous. In other words, vulnerability was not viewed as uniform or inevitable. This was illustrated in the context of ethnically minoritised communities. Officers acknowledged that while individuals may be more likely to be 'targeted by people' (I1, Brookwood) or more susceptible to becoming 'victims of hate crime' (S3, Ashgrove), these risks and experiences did not manifest in the same way or to the same degree across all members of such communities. For example:

> '[N]ot everyone from an ethnic minority is a victim of hate crime… It might be more prevalent, but not everyone is' (CI1, HQ).

The potential for uneven distributions of vulnerability within and across social categories was reaffirmed by a sergeant who observed that, in the context of understanding people's experience of vulnerability, 'there's no one-size-fits-all sort of thing' (S3, Ashgrove). This perspective reinforces the framing of vulnerability as a socially contingent concept, shaped by the specific conditions and dynamics of individual situations (6.2.2.).

Officers' interpretations of vulnerability as an individually experienced condition, emerging from the interaction between personal characteristics, past and present circumstances and surrounding environments revealed further alignments between their understandings with situational and pluralistic approaches to vulnerability (Chapter Two, 2.1.). Specifically, they resonated with the view that assigning vulnerability as a 'blanket attachment to social groups' was a potentially flawed approach for its capability to overlook the diverse and dynamic ways vulnerability can be experienced and expressed (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021: 9; Chapter Two, 2.1.).

6.3.4. Section summary

This section demonstrated how and why several officers deemed the task of defining vulnerability as practically challenge. Their accounts indicated not only that the force's adopted definition did not eliminate ambiguity nor provide complete conceptual clarity, but also that, despite the organisation's framework, considerable scope remained for individual interpretation. In fact, officers' responses suggested that such interpretive work was actively required, given the context-dependent and situational nature of vulnerability which was perceived as demanding case-by-case assessments. In this respect, officers' understandings

were consistent with long-standing conventions in police practice which hold that ‘at the heart of everyday policing is the matter of judgement and discretion’ (Newburn, 2022: 440).

6.4. Conclusion

While there was no single universal definition across officers’ interpretations of vulnerability, several recurring themes spanned the data. At a broad level, vulnerability was commonly defined in relation to risk, incapacity, relative disadvantage and need, which attributed to it both conceptual meaning and operational value. Within this framing, vulnerability was often constructed as a situational condition associated with certain identities, contexts and circumstances. Officers consistently emphasised the concept’s socially mediated nature and identified how it could be shaped by and realised through an interplay between one’s personal physiological traits and their environmental conditions. At the same time, the challenges of defining vulnerability were widely observed, as officers described how its dynamic and ambiguous nature rendered the concept resistant to categorisation. In this sense, something of a caveat surfaced in officers’ definitions of vulnerability; despite them offering their own interpretations, several simultaneously indicated how these were provisional and unable to capture fully and certainly the complexity and scope of vulnerability.

The findings suggest that vulnerability was situated less as a stable concept or predefined label and more as a matter of officers’ own judgements. Constructions of vulnerability as informed, at least partially, by individual interpretation, have important implications for the form and consistency of approaches to how officers interact with people they deem to be vulnerable. The next chapters explore how officers identified and responded to such individuals.

Chapter Seven: Identifying vulnerable people in neighbourhood policing

This chapter examines how neighbourhood officers identified vulnerable individuals. It explores the forms of knowledge, methods and judgement through which vulnerability became recognisable to officers, thus moving beyond the conceptual definitions outlined in Chapter Six to examine how these understandings are operationalised in frontline practice. Furthermore, analysing the interpretive and practical processes through which officers identified vulnerable people provides important context for the actions that followed, namely officers' responses to those individuals (Chapter Eight).

This chapter is organised into three overarching sections, each addressing a key strategy officers adopted to identify vulnerable individuals. The first section explores officers' use of official guidance, referring to official police organisational resources and authorised practical tools. It sets out how many officers routinely relied on these tools and valued their contribution for supporting more structured and consistent police practice. It also reveals how some questioned their necessity on the belief that officers were capable, or at least should be capable, of identifying signs of vulnerability without relying on authorised directives.

The second section, by contrast, examines how officers' intuition informed their approaches to identifying vulnerable people. It explores the prevalent understanding of sensing or 'knowing' vulnerability as a craft officers developed and refined through their occupational experiences. The section also considers the potential limits of officers' intuition, namely how its grounding in subjective and culturally informed perspectives may restrict officers' ability to identify less visible or less readily recognised forms of vulnerability.

The third section considers how officers used and valued engagement with people suspected of being vulnerable as means of gathering information to probe and check their initial impressions. It explores how, in some cases, this process was complicated by the extent to which individuals were willing or able to engage. Barriers stemmed both from the police's reputation and adversarial relationships with some groups, and from the ways that certain vulnerabilities, particularly those linked to exploitation and abuse, were actively concealed from the police.

While these approaches are separated for analytical clarity, they were not discrete in practice. Officers often moved between them, and they frequently overlapped and informed one another.

Taken as a whole, the chapter shows that identifying vulnerable people in neighbourhood policing was not straightforward or purely procedural, but an iterative and cumulative process.

7.1. The use of official guidance to identify vulnerable people

A main way through which officers identified vulnerable people was by using official guidance authorised by SYP. In recent years, there has emerged a significant number of tools and policies designed to improve and standardise how the police recognise and assess vulnerability (see COP, 2013; 2015; 2020; 2021; COP and NPCC, 2025). In this study, several officers observed the prevalence of such tools. For instance, two PCSOs during a conversation remarked: '*We have access to various support and information to help us identify [vulnerability]*' and '*There's loads of guidance when it comes to us measuring vulnerability*' (Ashgrove, 06/06/23). On occasion, the number and availability of frameworks was described as a recent development, accompanying the contemporary focus on vulnerability within SYP (Chapter Five) and national policing more broadly (Chapter Two, 2.3.). As a sergeant said:

> '*Nowadays there's almost an acronym or a directive for everything we need to think about to see if someone's vulnerable… There's much more for us draw on now compared to ten years ago*' (Brookwood, 13/04/23).

Among the authorised guidance officers cited as informing their efforts to identify vulnerable people, the THRIVE model – outlined in the COP (2021) guidance titled 'Introduction to vulnerability-related risk' – was widely referenced. As a PCSO mentioned in an interview, '[w]e use THRIVE… to help us see [vulnerability]' (PCSO2, Ashgrove). Likewise, during the observational fieldwork a sergeant said '*THRIVE is something we're always thinking about when looking for vulnerability*' (Brookwood, 13/04/23).

The THRIVE– Threat, Harm, Risk, Investigation, Vulnerability and Engagement – framework directs officers to notice and evaluate a person's vulnerabilities and use these insights to inform their risk assessments (COP, 2021). Some officers highlighted this link between identifying signs of vulnerability and measuring threat, harm and risk. For example:

> 'We have various ways of [identifying vulnerability]… We've got the THRIVE… [T]hreat, harm and risk really inform everything we do' (I3, Whitechurch).

> '… in the back of my mind, [I am] assessing that threat, harm and risk, which has got vulnerability underpinning it… I would use those sorts of tools to help me define… [the] course of action' (CI, HQ).

The focus on assessing risk-related factors to identify vulnerable people reinforces the idea of risk as a defining dimension of vulnerability (Chapter Six, 6.1.) and aligns with wider academic and policy discourses that often conceptualise vulnerability through risk-orientated frameworks (Chapter Two). Moreover, it reflects the notion of risk work – understood broadly as work concerned with the knowledge, identification and management of risk – as central to police work (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997; Black and Lumsden, 2020; Smith, 2025).

The Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF) was also highlighted as an authorised tool used to identify vulnerable people. Originally developed to assist practitioners responding to mental health incidents (Wright and McGlen, 2012), it is now incorporated into COP (2021) guidance. The VAF encourages officers to look for 'clues' of vulnerability using the ABCDE sequence: Appearance, Behaviour, Communication, Danger and Environment. Several officers described drawing on this sequence. For instance, a constable explained:

> '*If I'm going into something or having a conversation… [the VAF] is certainly in my head… I'm always going through: okay, what's the risk here? What's their appearance like? How old do they look? How are they behaving? I'll see how they're speaking with me and what's going on around them*…' (Ashgrove, 18/04/23).

An inspector offered a similar account:

> '[To measure a person's vulnerabilities]… you look at the appearance of the person; you look at their behaviour... [A]re they able to communicate with us? [Are there] any obvious dangers?... Obviously, any person under 18, if they're a subject of an investigation, will become vulnerable by the nature that they're under 18' (I3, Whitechurch).

As these quotes illustrate, elements of official guidance encouraged officers to identify signs of vulnerability through observable cues and structured, predefined prompts. When officers treated specific characteristics, such as age, as indicators of vulnerability, their accounts reflected longstanding narratives in policy and practice that affiliate certain traits and identities with vulnerability (Chapter Two; Chapter Six, 6.2.).

Akin to the THRIVE model, the VAF supports a risk-orientated approach that encourages officers to assess vulnerability alongside perceived risk levels (COP, 2021). As a constable outlined:

> 'I use it [the ABCDE mnemonic] when risk-assessing incidents… The things that we have in place, we would go through each and every single one… to see if somebody's at a higher risk [and if] they're more vulnerable' (PC4, Whitechurch).

Beyond the THRIVE model and VAF, other frameworks used to support officers' identification of vulnerable people included the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment (DASH) risk tool (COP, 2016; 2022).[34] Described as 'the obvious one… we always use' (PC3, Whitechurch) in cases of domestic abuse, this model offers a standardised set of questions designed to help officers recognise high-risk individuals. As an inspector described:

> 'If you're looking in terms of domestic abuse, if it's a high-risk victim, you come to it being high risk by going through your DASH... and there are specific questions on there… that will inform the risk [assessment]' (I3, Whitechurch).

References were also made to the problem-solving triangle (Chapter Five, 5.3.; Heinonen, 2013). A constable suggested that this model's emphasis on the relationship between offenders, victims and locations enabled officers to recognise recurring patterns and interactions across these three elements. He considered how such insights could inform their evaluations of vulnerability:

> 'The triangle we have… where you've got offender–victim–locations… if the offender's there [at a location with a victim] constantly, you put it at higher risk because they [the victim] are more vulnerable' (PC4, Whitechurch).

The fact that place-related factors could affect officers' identification and grading of vulnerability reinforces the view of vulnerability as a spatially affected condition informed by situational and environmental dynamics (Chapters Five; Six).

7.1.1. The strengths and limitations of using official guidance

Officers' discussions of official guidance sometimes included reflections on the strengths and limitations of these tools. On the positive side, several felt that the use of such guidance promoted more consistent and comprehensive practice. For instance, supporting the claim that the VAF provides to officers an 'astute and easy to remember assessment tool' (Williams, 2023: 35), a constable said:

> '*It [the VAF] helps in the sense that it gives you a guide you can work through… so in a situation you can think "right, let's take one of the ABC[DE] things at a time" and then you know you've gone through everything*' (Ashgrove, 06/06/23).

[34] The DASH risk tool has recently been replaced by an updated framework – the DARA (Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment) – after research found shortcomings and inconsistencies in frontline applications of the DASH model (COP, 2022b).

Some officers considered that authorised guidance had improved their ability to identify vulnerable people. A constable suggested that, prior to the DASH tool becoming embedded in routine practice, domestic abuse assessments had lacked structure, increasing the risk of officers missing key vulnerability indicators. Reflecting wider claims that the development of the DASH model was a 'landmark moment in the development of risk assessment to domestic abuse' (Turner et al., 2019: 1028), he argued that the model had promoted more thorough and effective approaches to identifying signs of vulnerability in the domestic abuse context:

> 'The idea of DASH wasn't what it is now… I can see the difference… If I went to a domestic incident back when I started [nine years ago] where there wasn't as many enforced policies…, you might not have picked up any sort of signs. But now, especially with the DASH coming into place, you can just pick up on certain responses, body language and whatnot' (PC4, Whitechurch).

More senior officers concurred that the development and implementation of official guidance had equipped officers with the means required to make effective assessments of vulnerability. For example:

> '[A]ll this THRIVE and vulnerability assessment framework… they're all embedded… So not only have we got the knowledge but we've got the tools to assess it [vulnerability] in the right way' (I3, Whitechurch)

> 'I think the whole recognition of vulnerability… is very effective within policing… [W]e've given our officers the tools to recognise vulnerability' (CI1, HQ).

Such reflections indicate how authorised tools were valued for both guiding individual decision-making and promoting better and more consistent practices across SYP more generally. Indeed, as a sergeant put it, such guidance was sometimes interpreted as part of a broader institutional effort to standardise everyday police practice:

> '… *It means we're all doing the same kind of thing…; all singing from the same hymn sheet kind of thing*' (Ashgrove, 06/06/23).

That official guidance was seen to encourage officers to '*sing[…] from the same hymn sheet*' (Ashgrove, 06/06/23) links to the scholarship positioning such tools as mechanisms for regulating practice and counterbalancing the aspects of police work driven by occupational cultures and experiences (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997). This premise sits at the heart of evidence-based policing (EBP) which argues that police decision-making should be directed by scientific research, robust analysis and systematic processes, rather than by officers' intuition alone (Lum and Koper, 2017; Boulton et al., 2021). As Sherman (1998: 4; 2013;

2015) explains, the model seeks to 'parse out and codify unsystematic "experience" as the basis for police work' and instead use 'the best evidence to shape the best practice'. In essence, EBP is concerned with tempering the culturally informed excesses of police discretion and craft-work which have long been associated with malpractice and ineffective policing (Bayley and Bittner, 1984; Weisburd and Neyroud, 2011). From this perspective, tools such as THRIVE, DASH and the VAF can be seen as top-down attempts to enhance consistency and constrain bias in police practice.

Alongside recognising the value of official guidance, officers sometimes also reflected on their limitations. For example, it was noted how, despite intending to regulate practice, such tools could still be applied inconsistently. A constable made this point by recalling occasions in which other officers completed DASH assessments in ways that he felt were flawed:

> '[I]t depends on how you do it… I've had jobs where student officers had done a DASH and when the job got handed to me… I knew there was… stuff was missed, and I would have graded it high risk, not medium risk' (PC3, Whitechurch).

The notion that a framework's effectiveness 'depends on how you do it' (PC3, Whitechurch) highlights how officers' own knowledge and judgements still hold weight, even when working within ostensibly standardised frameworks. This confirms discretion as deeply embedded in frontline policing (Waddington, 1999; Fleming and Rhodes, 2018; Newburn, 2022).

Another limitation raised by officers regarded the extent to which official guidance could capture the details and complexities of individual cases. For instance, an inspector noted the potential mismatch between the level of demand reported under a formal assessment and the actual vulnerability levels present in a situation:

> 'Risk can't be graded by the amount of demand… Sometimes we get people that are everyday: demand, demand, demand, but the risks are really low… [Elsewhere] there are some extremely vulnerable people that probably cause us no demand at all' (I2, Ashgrove).

A similar perspective surfaced during the observational fieldwork. Noting the scope for frameworks to fall short in their ability to fully reflect and accommodate the nuances of a case, a constable described the need for officers to sometimes…:

> '*… look outside of the pointers [stipulated under the frameworks] because in some cases the signs of vulnerability just don't fit in them*' (Brookwood, 28/03/23).

These reflections reemphasise a recognition outlined in Chapter Six (6.3.) concerned with the potential flaws in presuming vulnerability can always be 'neatly recognized and categorized'

into clear definitive or quantifiable measures (Menichelli, 2019: 701). The importance of looking beyond tightly drawn doctrines of official guidance is acknowledged in policy itself. For example, COP (2021) guidance outlines the expectation for officers to question assumptions, explore situational factors and use their professional judgement when making decisions, rather than relying solely on fixed checklists. Fleming and Rhodes (2018: 20) make a similar argument, stressing the need to platform and 'weave… together' the different sources of knowledge in policing, rather than simply prioritising research-based knowledge and attempting to quell craft knowledge built through experience. Section 7.3. revisits this topic to examine how officers used engagement as a means of investigating and checking their initial impressions of a situation.

7.1.2. Deliberating the contribution of official guidance

Beyond flagging some limitations of official guidance, several officers questioned whether they were necessary at all. While acknowledging that such tools could offer useful guidance, there was a simultaneous presumption that officers were – or at least ought to be – sufficiently equipped and experienced to identify signs of vulnerability without having to rely on official direction. For example, a constable described how identifying vulnerable people was '*something we as officers instinctively can usually do on our own*' (Brookwood, 28/03/23). In a similar vein, a sergeant suggested:

> '*[Official guidelines] can help with giving some direction… but I'd generally expect my team to be able to see vulnerability for themselves without having to rely on a formal list of things or official guidance*…' (Whitechurch, 15/04/23).

A constable also claimed:

> '*I can see why we have them… but… they don't do anything that grand… I don't think we necessarily need something to tell us to look at someone's behaviour and risk assess their environment… We know that*' (Whitechurch, 04/04/23).

Where the identification of vulnerable people was understood as a skill officers already possessed, authorised guidance was sometimes framed as limited in the extent to which it materially informed practice. As one constable put it, these tools could be taken as something akin to '*teaching your grandma how to suck eggs*' (Ashgrove, 01/03/23). This contributed to a view of official guidance as serving a largely bureaucratic function. Indeed, they were described occasionally as mechanisms for retrospectively recording and justifying decisions, rather than shaping the decisions themselves. For example, a constable noted the possibility of

the DASH tool being used ‘so you can tick the box to say “I've done a DASH”’ (PC3, Whitechurch). A sergeant reiterated this perspective in the context of the VAF:

> ‘[The VAF] is just something… [so] you can say, “Well, I looked at this, this, this and this, and I made my decision”… It’s just… instincts. You know what you're dealing with’ (S1, Whitechurch).

An inspector also described using of authorised tools as a way of formally recording practice. His comment reemphasised the idea of such tools striving to make policing more consistent:

> ‘[Using official guidelines] is part of the national decision-making model… That’s something that everyone does… [W]e do it in that way because it kind of explains everything that you're doing... It puts it in formal writing’ (I4, HQ).

The belief that officers ‘know what [they are] dealing with’ (S1, Whitechurch) was articulated explicitly by an inspector who grounded his ability to identify vulnerable people as a competency established and honed over decades of experience. Hence, he did not deem it necessary to rely on official guidance:

> ‘I don't use th[em] because I've been a cop 32 years… You can call it a feeling; you can call it experience… It doesn’t get any more complicated than that’ (I2, Ashgrove).

These accounts position the identification of vulnerability as an internally cultivated skill rather than something learned through official instruction. They resonate strongly with longstanding scholarship on policing as a craft, where decision-making is informed by tacit knowledge, shared occupational norms and discretionary judgement refined through experience (Chapter Two, 2.3.1.). Research has found that frontline workers can privilege their craft-based knowledge over top-down reform efforts, which can make organisational attempts to standardise practice and reduce culturally informed excesses of police discretion difficult to ingrain (Gau and Gaines, 2012; Fleming and Rhodes, 2018). Officers’ characterisations of frameworks as bureaucratic processes, rather than operational tools, reflect this dynamic.

7.1.3. Section summary

While several officers described routinely drawing on official guidance in their approaches to identifying vulnerable people, others highlighted the potential limits of such tools and questioned the extent to which they were required in practice. Underpinning this latter perspective was a belief that officers already had the skills required to identify signs of vulnerability without relying on authorised guidelines. This reflects a central dynamic in

policing: while official guidance may seek to promote consistency, structure and accountability, it does not displace officer discretion. Ultimately, the influence of such tools remains contingent on how, and if, officers choose to enact them in practice.

7.2. Operationalising intuition: the common sense and craft of 'knowing' vulnerability

As the previous section introduced, while official guidance may help to check intuition by encouraging officers to adopt more structured approaches, many officers still positioned their intuition as central to identifying vulnerable people, at times according to this experiential, craft-based knowledge greater practical weight than official guidance. This privileging of such knowledge aligns with the research suggesting that frontline officers tend to trust and call upon their personal expertise more than official instructions (Gau and Gaines, 2012; Fleming and Rhodes, 2018).

In certain cases, officers characterised vulnerability as straightforward to identify. As a constable stated, 'sometimes it can be obvious' (PC5, Whitechurch). This view was frequently highlighted in the context of visible cues being taken to make vulnerability appear self-evident. For example:

> '[Vulnerability] may be immediately obvious. You might be able to see from looking at them' (I4, HQ).

Various visible cues were described as signalling 'obvious' signs of vulnerability. For example, vulnerability among the 'street cohort' was framed as 'generally very obvious', demonstrated through clear physical indicators such as 'holes in your trousers where you've been injecting [drugs] into your leg' (PC3, Whitechurch). Similarly, a constable described how a person who was '*completely out of it, hunched over like they're dead*' represented to him '*a pretty obvious case of vulnerability*' (Whitechurch, 17/05/23). Another constable suggested:

> '*You can sometimes tell [whether someone is vulnerable] just from the state of them – their clothing, their general demeanour, what they might have on them, even how they're stood sometimes'* (Ashgrove, 26/01/23).

Officers also considered how environmental cues could constitute 'obvious' markers of vulnerability. For instance, a sergeant interpreted situations involving '*absent parents… where there's young kids being left on their own or sat in filth*' as presenting '*clear signs*' of risk and vulnerability (Brookwood, 19/06/23). A PCSO also stated:

> '*If there's someone teetering on a bridge, you're not thinking "yeah fine, they're okay". You're more thinking "that's somebody clearly at risk who's going through something"*' (Ashgrove, 06/06/23).

The focus on visible cues reflected certain instructions prescribed by some official guidance which, for example, direct officers to assess a person's appearance and surrounding environment when making judgements of risk and vulnerability (COP, 2021; 7.1.).

Where signs of vulnerability were considered 'obvious', officers presented the identification of them as a process grounded in common sense. As one constable put it, identifying vulnerable people was '*by and large, a matter of common sense and being human*' (Brookwood, 19/06/23). An inspector summarised this logic by remarking: 'If it walks like a duck and sounds like a duck, it's probably a duck' (I2, Ashgrove).

Such appeals to 'common sense' risked obscuring the inherently interpretive nature of officers' judgements. As discussed in Chapter Two (2.3.1.), officers develop a distinctive way of seeing the world. Through these shared interpretive frameworks, Manning (1978: 73) argues, a 'commonsense reality' that guides officers' decisions and actions is produced. Crucially, this 'reality' is inherently subjective, for it is grounded in officers' occupational experiences and cultures (Chapter Two, 2.3.1.). Thus, framings of identifying vulnerable people as a matter of 'common sense' overlooked the fact that what counted as 'obvious' or 'intuitive' was shaped by culturally informed occupational perspectives and assumptions. Section 7.2.1. returns to this issue to examine how officers' particular worldview may call into question the reliability of intuition as a means of identifying vulnerable people.

Officers flagged how these supposedly 'obvious' cues of vulnerability were not present in every situation. In such cases, officers described calling upon more tacit, affective forms of knowledge. Dane and Pratt's (2007: 40) characterisation of intuition as 'affectively charged judgements that arise through rapid, non-conscious and holistic associations' resonates here, as officers' decisions mostly emerged from situational judgements shaped by their sense of what was considered normal, and crucially, what was not. The process of identifying vulnerability, it was widely held, involved officers experiencing an embodied sense that something was 'off' or 'not right'. As one inspector put it, officers identified vulnerable people by 'seeing something and thinking: "that doesn't feel right"' (I2, Ashgrove). A PCSO similarly explained, 'you just get a little "spidey sense" that [makes] you think something's not quite right here' (PCSO1, Ashgrove).

Fieldnotes capture a moment where an officer acted on this initial feeling of unease:

I'm with two constables in a van leaving the police station when we notice a man loitering near the carpark entrance. Having roused suspicion, the constable driving rolls down her window to speak with the man. It quickly becomes apparent that he is experiencing psychosis; he runs into the road, shouting that he has a knife and that the mafia have drugged him and are going to kill him. The officers quickly vacate the vehicle and attempt to calm down the man. He continues running about, refusing to let anyone near him. Response officers are called as backup. Eventually he is restrained. A search of his bag and pockets reveals NHS and immigration documents, drug paraphernalia and suspected crystal meth and marijuana. He is taken by the response officers into the station where they plan to keep him 'until he's sobered up'. As we leave the scene, I ask the constable what caused her to want to approach the man. She replies: 'I don't really know. There was just something that made me think "something's not right here"... His behaviour was off... I just knew something was up' (Whitechurch, 14/04/23).

Officers' repeated references to identifying signs of vulnerability by sensing things that 'don't feel right' (I2, Ashgrove) reinforce the framing of vulnerability as a condition of difference and something that stands out against the realm of expected normalcy (Chapter Six). A sergeant reiterated this perspective:

> '[Identifying vulnerability] is just about having an eye on people and being streetwise almost, to understand that this situation is not right… It's reading between the lines sometimes' (S4, Whitechurch).

Such comments align closely with the discourse outlined in Chapter Two (2.3.1.) suggesting that police work largely involves officers identifying divergences from social norms to uphold social order. This skill both emphasises the interpretive and discretionary nature of police work (Bittner, 1980; 1990; Newburn, 2022) and reinforces the longstanding sense of policing as craft-based, grounded in experiential knowledge (Wilson, 1968; Rubenstein, 1973).

The sentiment that identifying vulnerable people was a skill based in practice and craft knowledge, defined by Willis and Mastrofski (2014: 323) as 'the knowledge, skill, and judgment acquired by daily experience', was widely observed. As an inspector noted, '[a] lot of it is experience… You build it through the job' (I4, HQ). A constable reiterated:

> 'I think the more experienced you are, then you can potentially identify whether they are vulnerable or not…' (PC7, Ashgrove).

Moreover, two constables suggested that '*over time we just learn how to see it [vulnerability]'* (Ashgrove, 20/04/23) and, similarly, '*you learn what to look for... Your gut feeling... gets*

stronger over time' (Ashgrove, 18/04/23). In the same vein, a sergeant perceived his ability to '*see vulnerability*' (Brookwood, 13/04/23) to have been refined through experience:

> '*When I think back to what I knew in the early days of my career, I didn't know much… Now, I'm pretty comfortable I've developed the skills to see vulnerability*' (Brookwood, 13/04/23).

These accounts highlight the cumulative, experiential nature of police knowledge, resonating with the notion of what Vinten (2018) describes as the 'copper's nose': a form of tacit expertise built through practice. For Vinten (2018: 226), 'You can't teach it… it doesn't become instinct until you've been on the streets… until it clicks'.

Overall, intuition and experience were situated as critical means upon which officers drew to identify vulnerable people. Specifically, the policing tradition of reading what is unexpected, abnormal or out of place acted as the underpinning logic of this process, reinforcing the idea of vulnerability as an exceptional condition and the characterisation of police work as fundamentally interpretive and craft-based.

7.2.1. The limits of relying on intuition and experience to identify vulnerable people

Despite the centrality of intuition and experience in how officers identified vulnerable people, they were not infallible. As the previous section mentioned, occupational police cultures and experiences cultivate a particular worldview among officers, developing subjective 'perceptual lenses' through which they interpret the world (Waddington, 1999: 101; Chapter Two, 2.3.1.). As Chapter Five (5.2.2.) explored, officers' repeated exposure to particular people and situations can shape their perceptions of these subjects. Because officers' intuition is grounded in their culturally informed worldview, it is itself inherently partial. This raises questions about its reliability as a means of identifying vulnerable people.

Officers' distinct worldview was evident in how they categorised certain identities and drew broad generalisations about social groups they routinely encountered. Observational fieldnotes illustrate this process. After a warrant uncovered a cannabis farm in a rented property, a constable confidently attributed responsibility to a person or people of a particular nationality, despite there being no suspect at the scene. In his words:

> '*You get these cannabis grows and it's always Albanians… People have a problem with us trying to stop them [refugees] coming in on boats, I get it when they're coming from Afghanistan and stuff, but it's the Albanians… Oh yeah, you were forced to come;*

you were forced to water the plants; you were forced to come here illegally. Yeah, sure. Rubbish' (Ashgrove, 20/03/23).

Another time, while on route to a family domestic in the ethnically diverse area of Ashgrove, a different constable remarked:

'*We get shit like this all the time round here with these families… It's a cultural thing… Having major issues is normal for them* ' (Ashgrove, 08/03/23).

Statements such as '*it's always Albanians*' (Ashgrove, 20/03/23) and '*Having major issues is normal for them*' (Ashgrove, 08/03/23) demonstrate how accumulated occupational experiences can inform generalised expectations about certain groups. This aligns with the research discussed in Chapter Two (2.3.1.) which reveals how officers' exposures and work can prompt and reinforce assumptions among those they routinely encounter (Ericson, 1982; Cashmore, 2001; Alpert et al., 2005). This indicates the biased nature of officers' intuition.

Evidence that officers' interpretations were shaped by what they had come to expect from particular people and places also surfaced in their real-time judgements during interactions with citizens. In one case, during a late-evening car patrol, two constables saw two people in dark tracksuits who began running when they noticed the police car. When the individuals split up and ran in different directions, the officers pursued – and soon caught up with – one who turned out to be a teenage boy known to the police for prior knife and drug offences. The encounter that ensued is described in the following fieldnotes:

As the car pulls up alongside the boy, the officer driving rolls down his window and says 'Hello Tom. Why're you running?'. Tom looks down and says: 'I wasn't'. The officer replies, 'You were, and because you've got previous for knives, we're going to search you, ok?'. Tom is clearly agitated by the interaction. In a disgruntled tone, he says 'go on then, search me. You won't find anything'. He's read his rights and the reasons for the search are repeated. Nothing is found. Once back in the car, the officers reflect on the encounter. One states 'He's a nuisance. [It's] just as likely that we would've found something... I bet the other kid had something on them' (Brookwood, 22/02/23).

This officer's judgement, and his decision to stop and search Tom, appeared to be guided not only by his observation of Tom's behaviour in this specific instance, but also by his preexisting judgements about this individual, as informed by prior experiences. This reflected the literature suggesting that much police work involves officers 'prejudging' people and situations (Wilson, 1968: 38; Chapter Two, 2.3.1.). Crucially, though nothing was found in the search, and hence there was an absence of evidence to substantiate the officer's judgement, he did not question

his intuition, as implied by his presumption that '*I bet the other kid had something on them*' (Brookwood, 22/02/23).

A similar pattern emerged during a foot patrol in Ashgrove, when a constable noticed a new, expensive sports car parked on a residential street with a man sat in the driver's seat. Flagging this as unusual, the officer said *'I'm going to run that reg[istration plate] through the system, see if anything comes back'* (Ashgrove, 08/03/23). Fieldnotes present the sequence of events that followed:

> *The officer's phone search tells him that the car is insured and has not been reported as missing. Nonetheless, he approaches the driver and asks for proof of insurance and ownership. The man scrolls on his phone to find the requested information. He shows them to the officer who accepts the documents as proof. As we walk away, he explains to me: 'As a rule people round here don't afford nice cars through legit[imate] means… A lot of the time it's probably been nicked or gotten through dodgy money… This fella obviously had the stuff to prove [ownership] but that's rare… It's always worth checking'* (Ashgrove, 08/03/23).

Here, the officer's suspicion appeared to be triggered by the perceived incongruity of an expensive car in that neighbourhood, and his past exposure to such circumstances signalling criminality. This reinforces the idea of police work involving officers spotting 'deviations from the standard pattern' (Rubenstein, 1973: 259; Chapter Two, 2.3.1.). Even after the driver produced valid documentation, the officer suggested that the encounter was justified due to the perceived '*rare[ness]*' of such cars being attained through '*legit[imate] means*' (Ashgrove, 30/03/23).

These examples matter for vulnerability-focused policing because the perceptual habits that attune officers to signs of criminality are the same ones they might rely on to judge whether someone is vulnerable. When officers interpret certain groups or behaviours primarily through expectations of risk, deviance or 'problem' tendencies, cues that might otherwise signal vulnerability can be overlooked or sidelined. In this sense, suspicion of criminality and suspicion of vulnerability are not distinct interpretive tracks; rather, the former can, in practice, obscure and eclipse the latter. This exposes a key limitation of relying on intuition and experience to identify vulnerable people: officers' judgements are filtered through occupationally cultivated expectations about who is likely to be risky, troublesome or 'out of place', diverting attention away from assessing whether those individuals might in fact be vulnerable. This dynamic resonates with the literature showing that offenders and suspects are less readily accepted as vulnerable (Chapter Two, 2.2.; 2.3.) and sits uneasily with the

vulnerability lens, which seeks to unsettle the traditional victim–offender binary (Chapter Five, 5.2.).

The significance of the cases above also lies in the fact that officers displayed feeling vindicated in their judgements despite finding no evidence to support their intuition. Their sense of validation rested not on the outcomes of the encounters but on their pre-existing expectations that told them something was likely to be found. These cases indicate not only how intuition operates under a biased framework but also its scope to be misguided and misleading. This matters because where officers drew upon intuition to identify signs of vulnerability, the very foundations of their intuition were themselves fallible. Some officers acknowledged this fallibility. For instance, an inspector said:

> 'Sometimes we'll get it wrong, you know, which rightly we should be held to task about that… And we get it wrong. We do, we're human beings… Assessments of risk, it's subjective, you know' (I2, Ashgrove).

A PCSO raised a similar observation in how officers identified markers of risk and vulnerability in the context of children:

> 'You can get a feel for kids who are doing kid things and being a bit silly… And then other ones, you'll get sworn at and you just get the impression that it's not going to end well… It's not 100% correct, but you'd probably have a good chance of predicting which way it's going to go…' (PCSO2, Ashgrove).

The acknowledgement that officers can 'get it wrong' (I2, Ashgrove) and their assessments may 'not [be] 100% correct' (PCSO2, Ashgrove) resonate with Newburn's (2022: 435) observation that policing is 'unavoidably complex, and error is an inescapable part of it'. A PCSO reiterated this perspective during the observational fieldwork:

> '*I like to think we recognise [a vulnerable person] when we see them, but obviously we can't always guarantee... It'd be impossible to spot absolutely everything we come across'* (Ashgrove, 06/06/23).

The fallibility of officers' intuition was considered compounded by the inherent complexity of vulnerability. As noted in Chapter Six (6.3.), officers frequently described vulnerability as conceptually ambiguous and sometimes difficult to define precisely. This ambiguity appeared to translate into practice when some vulnerabilities were considered less easily sensed and identified. As two officers acknowledged:

> 'Certainly, I wouldn't know if somebody is vulnerable straight away… 'we might only see the surface, but you never know what's underneath' (PC7, Ashgrove).

> ‘There're obviously hidden vulnerabilities… [Some] vulnerabilities might only come to the fore in a certain situation’ (CI, HQ).

A PCSO and sergeant made similar comments during the observational fieldwork:

> *‘You can’t always know whether someone is [vulnerable]. Sometimes it’s discreet; it can be really hard to pick up on it’* (Ashgrove, 06/06/23).

> ‘*There are people who do a great job of appearing completely fine on the surface… It can be hard to tell whether someone’s vulnerable in some cases*’ (Brookwood, 13/04/23).

The sense that at least some vulnerabilities may be less readily visible to, and thus less likely to be noticed and registered by, officers was described through the sense that certain types could evade the ‘police radar’ (I2, Ashgrove). For example:

> ‘Within our communities, there are some extremely vulnerable people who probably generate no demand at all… [There are] types of vulnerability that don’t appear on the police radar’ (I2, Ashgrove).

> ‘I'm sure there's a lot that goes off when it comes to child vulnerability that we’re just unaware of because they just don't hit the radar’ (PC2, Brookwood).

In cases where vulnerability was considered difficult to identify, officers’ comments chimed with Hinkel’s (2011: 200) claim that ‘vulnerability does not denote an observable phenomenon’. However, it is important to reiterate that this view was not predominant, let alone unanimous; as shown in the previous section here and in Chapter Six, certain forms of vulnerability were considered observable by officers. This tension – between the evident visibility of some vulnerabilities and the hiddenness of others – underscores the uneven recognisability of signs of vulnerability in practice (Gilson, 2014; 2024; Brown, 2015; Menichelli, 2019). As discussed in Chapter Two (2.2.), this disparity can result in more visible or conventional forms of vulnerability being identified and acted upon, while those less readily perceived or socially accepted may risk being overlooked.

These reflections reveal how several officers recognised their intuition as subjective, potentially incomplete and, at times, misguided. Their judgements were shaped by what was visible and familiar to them, meaning that less ‘obvious’ forms of vulnerability could fall outside of their interpretive frame, especially in cases involving actual or suspected deviance. Acknowledgements of the fallibility of officers’ intuition offer a counterpoint to earlier accounts in which identifying vulnerable people was framed as a matter of common sense and an established skill, thus challenging the image that officers inherently and always ‘know what [they’re] dealing with’ (S1, Whitechurch).

7.2.2. Section summary

Intuition and experience were widely recognised as central to how officers identified vulnerable people, providing them with a practical, craft-based knowledge they felt attuned them well to identifying signs of vulnerability. Often, identifying these signs was situated as a matter of common sense and a process informed by tacit craftwork built over time. Yet because officers' judgements were shaped by occupational cultures and experience, what was considered 'obvious' was not objective. Officers themselves sometimes acknowledged the limits of their intuition, noting the scope for vulnerability to fall beyond their initial frames of recognition.

These limitations point to the need for approaches that extend beyond surface impressions. The next section examines officers' use of engagement as a way of probing their initial judgements and providing a more thorough approach to identifying vulnerable people.

7.3. Engagement as a means of investigating, checking and confirming suspected vulnerability

A core premise of community policing lies in establishing and maintaining open, two-way engagement between the police and the public (Povey, 2001; Myhill, 2006; Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015). As outlined in Chapter Three, this communicative function is intended both to ensure that policing priorities are informed by public input and to reassure communities that their concerns are being heard and addressed (Innes, 2004a; 2006; Quinton and Morris, 2008; 2010).

In the context of identifying vulnerable people, engagement was framed less as a tool to facilitate two-way dialogue between the police and the public and more as a one-directional, often police-initiated process through which officers gathered information from and about individuals they encountered and suspected of being vulnerable. As two constables said, identifying signs of vulnerability depended on officers '*getting to know people, just through talking to them*' (Ashgrove, 08/03/23) and '*having chats to see what you can find*' (Brookwood, 09/03/23). A PCSO concurred that establishing whether someone was vulnerable involved officers 'having a conversation and… get[ting] to know [someone] as a person' (PCSO1, Ashgrove). A sergeant also stated:

> ‘It’s the conversation… 99% of [policing] is talking to people and communicating. The best police officers are excellent communicators; that's just how we identify vulnerability’ (S1, Whitechurch).

As noted in Sections 7.1. and 7.2., officers described how certain vulnerabilities did not always readily subscribe to predefined categories or register on the intuition-based ‘police radar’ (I2, Ashgrove). This recognition underpinned a perceived need to move beyond surface readings and assumptions and adopt a more investigative approach. As a sergeant described:

> ‘Someone might appear really level-headed and really calm, but a little bit of scraping, and a little bit of professional intrusion can sometimes lead to a lot more’ (S4, Whitechurch).

In the same vein, an inspector emphasised the importance of officers exercising ‘professional curiosity’ (I2, Ashgrove) and a sergeant described the process of identifying vulnerable people as ‘*a matter of us being curious and having a deeper look at things*’ (Brookwood, 13/04/23). This approach is formalised in COP (2021) guidance which encourages officers to focus on ‘clues, communication, curiosity’ in their assessments of vulnerability and directs them to elicit information and develop a ‘rich picture’ of situations they encounter.

Public engagement was widely positioned as the primary process through which this investigative work was carried out. Officers frequently suggested that it was through interpersonal communication that otherwise invisible or less visible signs of vulnerability could become discernible. As a constable suggested, identifying whether someone was vulnerable required officers to ‘spend time with them and see how they react and whether they answer the question you’re asking’ (PC7, Ashgrove). Others likewise described:

> ‘Initially you might think, “Oh, they're fine”. Then after a five-minute, ten-minute conversation, you think “oh, something's not quite right”’ (I4, HQ).

> ‘The easiest way to [identify vulnerability] as a cop is when I talk to somebody; it might just be the way they respond to a question or how they present themselves’ (PC8, Ashgrove).

A PCSO offered a similar reflection. Echoing O’Neill’s (2014: 270) research which found that most PCSOs described ‘communication’ (or ‘my mouth’) as their most often used ‘“tool” in their “tool box”’, this officer said:

> ‘[By] spending time with them, asking the right questions, you sort of get a feeling… You just sit and talk to them’ (PCSO1, Ashgrove).

Such reflections align with the COP's (2021) assertion that the elements of communication, clues, and curiosity may be mutually reinforcing. As the COP's guidance (2021) states, 'good communication can reveal more clues, which may open up more avenues for investigation (curiosity)… and so on'. An inspector developed this point, describing engagement as a way of gaining information to identify whether someone is vulnerable:

> 'Sometimes [vulnerability] is not always apparent… [so] you've got to ask… the right questions to actually understand what the issue is [and] how we can help… If you ask the right questions in detail, you can get that information. Don't just take it for granted' (I3, Whitechurch).

Occasionally, officers noted how this process could require a more patient approach, with certain vulnerabilities surfacing only after extensive engagement. For example:

> 'Sometimes it's not obvious until you've spoken to them for quite a long period of time and found out the circumstances of the situation' (PC5, Whitechurch).

Officers also recognised that identifying vulnerability was not a one-off task. As discussed in Chapter Six (6.3.), officers sometimes characterised vulnerability as dynamic, highlighting its potential to change, intensify and emerge in new forms as a person's circumstances shift. Officers therefore emphasised the need for them to sustain ongoing engagement with people as a means of, as a sergeant put it, '*keeping tabs on their situation'* (Brookwood, 13/04/23). A constable also stated:

> 'I… go and have a conversation with someone, even if I know I've spoken to them before [because] their situation might have changed. They might not have their property [anymore], they might have a week before they're kicked out, so I'll just speak to them' (PC4, Whitechurch).

It is important to make explicit that officers' use of engagement did not displace or even necessarily lessen the role of their intuition. Rather, they operated in conjunction with one another. As discussed in the prior section, officers often spoke of an internalised sense that something was 'not quite right' as an indication that somebody might be vulnerable. As the quotes in this section imply, engagement was essentially taken to work as a means by which officers could check whether their surface impressions were well-founded. As a constable said:

> '*It can often become clearer in light of a conversation with someone whether your impressions of them were on the right tracks or not*' (Ashgrove, 01/03/23).

In this sense, identifying vulnerable people constituted a multistep process in which an initial intuition would prompt officers to engage with someone and use conversation as a means of

probing and verifying that instinct. This reflected Akinci and Sadler-Smith's (2020: 85) account of officers' use of intuition in first-response decisions; as one participant put it: 'If you see something that doesn't look right, go and find out why'. A PCSO illustrated how this sequence might unfold in practice:

> 'If you see a group of young girls with older males, you think that's suspicious so go up and talk to them, see if they're alright, what they're doing, if they've got any drink… It's just really being inquisitive and just going over to that group' (PCSO1, Ashgrove).

The data in this section reveal how officers consistently emphasised engagement as critical to how they identified vulnerable people. However, they also highlighted that engagement was not always a straightforward process. Indeed, at times, certain barriers were perceived as constraining, and in some cases preventing, their engagement efforts, as the next section examines.

7.3.1. Barriers to using engagement to identify vulnerable people

Officers consistently noted how their attempts to use engagement as a means of identifying vulnerable people could be, and often were, stunted by how far individuals were willing or able to disclose information to them. The perceived reasons for this fit into two main categories: the organisational reputation and the propensity for certain vulnerabilities to be actively concealed from the police. The following explores these in turn.

The first barrier seen as constraining officers' engagement efforts concerned their reputation and the often tense, damaged and inherently adversarial relationship they shared with certain groups. Officers repeatedly described how public mistrust in the police shaped how certain citizens viewed and interacted with them. As a constable said, 'the legacy that we leave… carries that reputation and I think it's that that lets us down' (PC1, Ashgrove). An inspector also described:

> 'In a lot of cases there's been a certain level of mistrust with police because of historical ways. Well, I say historical, but to this day, [because of the] ways that we sometimes manage things involving minority groups' (I1, Brookwood).

A few officers highlighted these concerns as pronounced in South Yorkshire, where the force's involvement in various past high-profile incidents was seen to have caused enduring reputational damage and mistrust in SYP (Chapter Four, 4.3.1.). As an inspector and sergeant considered:

> ‘We have a lot of legacy issues in South Yorkshire, and that’s impacted confidence in the police’ (I4, HQ).

> ‘There's so many legacy issues [in SYP]. I wasn't a cop when the CSE scandal existed, or Hillsborough or Orgreave or anything else bad that has happened … It’s now my job to make sure that the interaction they [the public] have with the police in that area is a positive one. But it's like pushing sand up a hill because… there’s those 30 years that you’re fighting against’ (S5, HQ).

Several outlined how public mistrust and reluctance to communicate with officers were especially embedded in certain communities. For example, an inspector described the lasting implication of the Battle of Orgreave (Chapter Four, 4.3.1.) in former mining villages:

> ‘[In] the old pit villages… their parents were miners, they hate the cops, they hate what happened in the miner strikes so they’d never talk with you… They’d never report stuff because they don’t trust us. That's not changed’ (I4, HQ).

Many officers also described how scepticism towards the police in general among certain groups curtailed their engagement efforts and, in turn, limited their ability to identify vulnerability. During observational fieldwork, for example, a constable remarked, ‘*It’s hard for us to get anything from those who’re wary of us*’ (Ashgrove, 18/04/23). Another noted, ‘*Those that don’t trust us, they’re obviously not going to willingly share stuff with us*’ (Whitechurch, 14/04/23). A chief inspector similarly suggested:

> ‘[A]s a police officer in uniform, you’re already on the back foot because people don't want to speak to you… Why are they then going to tell a police officer their life story? They’re not’ (CI1, HQ).

The sense that distrust could undermine officers’ engagement efforts aligns with procedural justice scholarship which demonstrates that when individuals perceive authorities to act fairly and respectfully, they are more likely to trust them, see them as legitimate and engage with them (Tyler, 1990; Tyler and Huo, 2002; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Jackson et al., 2012). Conversely, perceptions of unfairness or bias can erode trust and legitimacy, reducing both compliance and, crucially in this context, willingness to share information (Tyler, 1990; Fischer et al., 2008).

Ethnically minoritised groups are an extensively documented focus within research on public trust and police–citizen relationships. As discussed in Chapter Two (2.3.1.), such groups have historically been subject to discriminatory policing, having long been overrepresented in practices such as stop and search, use of force and arrest. Indeed, Hough (2021: 51) summarises how ‘western industrialised democracies have a depressing track record in the

policing of ethnic minority groups'. Against this backdrop, a substantial body of research has consistently found lower levels of trust and confidence in the police among such populations (Tuch and Weitzer, 1997; Bowling and Phillips, 2002; Sharp and Atherton, 2007).

These patterns were reflected in this study, where relationships with ethnically minoritised communities were frequently described by officers as strained and difficult to establish, leading to problems in their engagement efforts. As two constables noted:

> '…Certainly, they feel that there's a barrier between us and them… I think that feeds into our interactions' (PC3, Whitechurch).

> '[S]ometimes we just don't have a relationship… People are too scared to come and talk to us' (PC5, Whitechurch).

Some considered how mistrust and barriers to communication could stem from perceptions or past experiences of policing in individuals' countries of origin. For example:

> 'I think sometimes if people have come from other countries then there's a big suspicion of the police because the police in their own countries are maybe a bit more authoritarian… They very much police by force, whereas we police by consent' (S3, Ashgrove).

An inspector illustrated this view in relation to the local Chinese community:

> '[The] Chinese community, they're like ghosts… They probably just don't trust us because of back home… We don't understand the risk in that community because they won't talk to us' (I4, HQ).

A constable elsewhere reinforced how – and why – mistrust in the police in one place could transcend global borders:

> '*We're all called police at the end of the day… so if you don't trust police in your home country, why would you trust police in this one?*' (Ashgrove, 08/03/23).

These accounts position perceptions of the police as informed not only, or even primarily, by direct personal contact but by prior experiences and wider social narratives. This reflects the literature demonstrating how attitudes towards the police can be formed indirectly, through the experiences of others, media representations or encounters in different jurisdictions (Brandl et al., 1994; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Mazerolle et al., 2013). In this way, preexisting distrust can shape interactions between citizens and police from the outset, affecting the former's willingness to engage and the latter's capabilities to identify vulnerable people (Hawdon, 2008).

Acknowledgments of these issues prompted several officers to highlight the need for a more representative police workforce, echoing existing research on the benefits of diversity in policing (van Ewijk, 2012; Bullock et al., 2017; McLeod and Herrington, 2017). For instance, a chief inspector said, 'If we look like the communities that we serve then we'll hopefully be a bit more trusted' (CI, HQ). A sergeant similarly recognised:

> 'It's nice for people to see people who look like them… coming to deal with them. It really does bring barriers down' (S4, Whitechurch).

Officers also described how the police role itself, in terms of its law enforcement status and associated powers, could undermine efforts to engage with citizens. As outlined in Chapter Five (5.3.), tensions between officers' enforcement duties and their 'softer', welfare-orientated functions revealed the potentially unsettled and ambiguous parameters of the neighbourhood policing remit. In the context of identifying vulnerability, these tensions arose where officers attempted to communicate with people involved in risk-related, disorderly or criminal conduct. In such cases, officers described how they were typically seen as agents of disruption or sanction, understood as discouraging peoples' willingness to engage. An example recorded in the fieldnotes demonstrates this:

> *I'm accompanying two constables on patrol in an area known for street sex work. They tell me that their intention is to conduct informal welfare checks and 'build up some lines of communication' between themselves and the women working in the area. During the patrol, the officers approach around 15 women, introducing themselves and saying things like 'we're here on a welfare check', 'we're here to help', and 'is there anything we can do for you?'. They are consistently met with avoidance, silence and sometimes open hostility. One woman says to them: 'When are you going? You've got to go. I've not had any customers because you lot are here'. Reflecting on the encounter afterwards, one constable remarks, 'We can show up and try, but they'll never engage with us… They'll never like us because they see us as a threat to their lifestyle. Why would they talk to us?'* (Whitechurch, 04/03/23).

This account illustrates how certain citizens' perceptions of what the police represent, namely '*a threat to their lifestyle*' (Whitechurch, 04/03/23), limits their willingness to share information with officers. A sergeant and inspector offered similar perspectives:

> 'If we're talking about groups of people who we have to enforce legislation against… They don't like us… We stop them doing [what they want]' (S1, Whitechurch).

> '… we have consistently bad relations… [with] organised criminals involved with drug dealing because that's their business and we are the enemy to them, so they're never going to be on side with us' (I1, Brookwood).

Officers considered how they could also be viewed as obstructive in the context of their interactions with certain young people, prompting resistance to engagement. For example, one said 'We're a figure of authority so it's very difficult to engage with youths' (CI1, HQ). Another described:

> 'I'd like to say every time we engage with a kid, it's 100% fully supportive and they love the police off the back of it. Nine times out of ten, that isn't the case… It's kind of like "they [the police] are here to ruin the fun again and cramp my style"' (PCSO2, Ashgrove).

These data demonstrate how officers perceived their efforts to identify vulnerable people as constrained by the adversarial nature of policing itself. When officers were perceived as untrustworthy and/or agents of control and enforcement, they considered their communication channels to become narrowed, if not closed, thus inhibiting their ability to gather information to identify vulnerable people.

The other overarching barrier concerned the nature of vulnerability itself and its frequent overlap with exploitation and abuse. In such cases, officers' engagement efforts were directed less towards establishing whether an individual was vulnerable – for this was often already assumed in the context of exploitation – and more towards uncovering the circumstances that might be creating or intensifying that vulnerability. Accessing this information, however, was described as particularly difficult. Officers understood that individuals experiencing exploitation might avoid police contact or actively conceal aspects of their situation, often because of loyalty to, or fear of reprisals from, those exerting control over them. As an inspector explained, communication between exploited individuals and the police was frequently constrained because 'the perpetrators actively keep it that way' (I2, Ashgrove). Others similarly explained:

> 'There's a reluctance to report things to the police… I know stuff goes off that don't get reported to us… [There's] a fear of consequences because if the offender found out they have told us then they might get some reprisals' (S2, Brookwood).

> 'We can try to engage with them as much as we possibly can, but to get information out of them, understandably, they're not going to give it [to] you because they know who they're involved [with], they know what power they have over them' (PCSO2, Ashgrove).

The fear of reprisals relating to police engagement was discussed most often in the context of suspected cuckooing (Spicer, 2021). The following observational fieldnotes indicate how such fear can influence individuals' willingness to engage, thereby restricting the information accessible to officers.

> *I'm with a PCSO on a car patrol when he spots a familiar local resident on the street. He winds down his window and says to the man 'Hiya Craig, how's it going?'. Without looking up, Craig mumbles 'alright thanks', before attempting to walk away. The PCSO drives alongside Craig as he walks and asks 'You got any worries or anything at the moment? Anything we can help you with?' Craig replies 'I'm not going to say anything, I'm not because I know what'll happen'. The officer did not press further, instead responding, 'Alright mate, if you're sure. But we're here if you ever change your mind'* (Brookwood, 08/06/23).

> *On a visit to a local hostel, two constables are speaking with a visibly distressed woman who is repeatedly saying that she's scared of her partner but feels unable to share more details. When officers asked basic questions about her circumstances – who her partner is, where he might be and what has happened – she continually professes 'I can't say! He can't find out I've spoken to you!'. Officers try to reassure her, saying 'We're not going to drop you in it' and 'We can only help you if you tell us'. She replies 'Don't say anything. I'll kill myself. I beg you, don't say anything'. About 15 minutes into the conversation, she refuses to speak further and leaves the room. Afterwards, one of the constables states 'She might be being cuckooed so she might be vulnerable… but we can't know anything unless she talks to us'* (Whitechurch, 04/04/23).

Another example, this time in the context of domestic abuse, was provided by an officer during an interview. His account describes the 'nightmare' (PC3, Whitechurch) of trying to gather information from an individual reluctant to engage with him:

> 'She had domestics with her partner who's a drug user… I said to her "are we alright, what's happening today?" and Shauna very aggressively sort of spat at me that "he's battered me". And then just trying to get something out of her is a nightmare… I was trying all sorts… She gave us little bits… but it was kind of in between [her] telling us…: "I'm not talking to you, I'm not a grass, fuck off"' (PC3, Whitechurch).

These examples highlight how, in cases of exploitation and abuse, signs of vulnerability may be actively withheld in ways that constrain officers' capability to understand a situation and determine an appropriate response. The fact that, as Chapter Six (6.1.) set out, vulnerability was often defined in relation to conditions of exploitation reveals a significant issue: the

situations involving exploitation and abuse, where vulnerability may be most acute, are often the very situations in which information is most inaccessible.

7.3.2. Section summary

This section outlined how engagement was understood and used as an investigative tool through which officers could probe and check their initial impressions and identify signs of vulnerability that were not immediately visible. In this way, communication functioned as a means of problem identification, enabling officers to more accurately determine whether a 'problem' existed—namely, whether someone was vulnerable. Because engagement was typically initiated when something already appeared 'off', identifying vulnerable people essentially represented a multistep, and sometimes ongoing, process guided by both intuition and targeted enquiry. This approach aligned with policy instructions directing officers to spot clues, communicate and be curious while exercising their 'professional judgement' (COP, 2021).

In some cases, however, officers perceived certain barriers as challenging and undermining their engagement efforts, sometimes impeding their ability to gather all the information required to identify vulnerable people. Thus, while officers viewed engagement as essential to their investigative work, its contribution was seen as heavily contingent on whether individuals felt able, safe and willing to speak with officers.

7.4. Conclusion

Officers identified vulnerable people through a combination of knowledge and direction provided by official guidance, their own intuitive judgements and public engagement. Officers noted the contributions of these strategies and their respective limitations. Importantly, these approaches did not operate in isolation but rather interacted in cumulative and mutually shaping ways. Official guidance provided a framework intended to standardise practice, structure officers' thinking and act as a check on the subjectivity of intuition; yet its use ultimately remained uneven and filtered through officers' own interpretive habits. Intuition, meanwhile, continued to guide who officers approached, how they interpreted behaviour and which situations they deemed worthy of further enquiry. Engagement thus functioned as the mechanism through which these initial impressions were probed, confirmed or revised. Identifying vulnerable people was therefore not only fundamentally interpretive and iterative

but also a cumulative process, shaped by the different but intersecting forms of police knowledge officers drew upon and also by the occupational cultures that inform how officers perceive and make sense of the people and places they police.

Examining how officers identified vulnerable people inevitably raises questions about what happened next. In the words of one chief inspector, 'It's almost the "so what?" question, isn't it. So, they're vulnerable. So what? What next?' (CI1, HQ). Such questions are addressed in the next chapter which explores neighbourhood officers' responses to vulnerable people.

Chapter Eight: Responding to vulnerable people in neighbourhood policing

This chapter examines the forms, underlying logics and practical effects of neighbourhood officers' responses to vulnerable people. It explores how these responses contributed to broader policing efforts to manage vulnerability, as well as the constraints and limitations that shaped their delivery. Building on the previous chapter's analysis of how officers identified vulnerable people, this chapter turns to the interventions that followed those judgements, thereby developing the account of how vulnerability was operationalised in neighbourhood policing.

The chapter is organised into four interrelated sections, each examining a key dimension of officers' responses. Although separated for analytical clarity, these response types were not discrete and the points at which they converged and interacted in practice are highlighted throughout this chapter.

The first section considers proactive responses, focusing on work undertaken after someone had been identified as vulnerable but outside incident-driven demand. These responses largely comprised ongoing engagement and routine patrols, through which officers used surveillance-based approaches to monitor vulnerable people and their situations and manage risks before they escalated into circumstances requiring immediate intervention.

The second section examines immediate responses, outlining how officers reacted when a vulnerable person was judged to require on-the-spot intervention. These approaches included patient engagement and de-escalation, short-term 'problem-solving' and, in some cases, enforcement to manage perceived risk and safeguard vulnerable individuals.

The third section explores long-term responses, examining both tailored, support-orientated work aimed at stabilising individuals' circumstances and enforcement as a last-resort, escalatory measure. While officers consistently preferred support-based approaches, viewing them as more conducive to durable problem-solving outcomes, enforcement remained seen and used as a back-up option when other interventions had failed.

The final section examines partnership responses. It outlines the role and opportunities of partnership working, considering how far multi-agency collaboration helped to overcome the limits of what neighbourhood officers could achieve alone when responding to vulnerable people. It also examines some of the challenges associated with partnership working.

8.1. Proactive responses to vulnerable people

In many cases, officers' responses to vulnerable people were proactive in nature. In this study, proactive responses refer to anticipatory actions undertaken in the absence of an immediate incident. In the wider literature, proactive policing, defined as 'an unprompted intervention into the lives of citizens' (Bland, 2022: 20), is most often framed as a crime-control strategy aimed at preventing or reducing crime and disorder by tackling the broader forces understood to generate them (Weisburd et al., 2019; Weisburd and Braga, 2019; He et al., 2026). Proactive work is also a longstanding feature of community policing models, including neighbourhood policing (Alderson, 1979; Higgins and Hales, 2017; Higgins, 2018a).

Activities focused on crime prevention were occasionally highlighted as a way of protecting vulnerable people proactively. This was most often discussed in relation to patrol work, which officers understood as decreasing vulnerability by deterring and reducing crime in the areas they covered, thereby lowering the likelihood that vulnerable people would be harmed. As a PCSO and constable explained during observational fieldwork:

> '*Us being out and about makes vulnerable people safer because our presence keeps crime down so the area's safer*' (Ashgrove, 06/06/23).

> '*Our patrols are key to us protecting our local vulnerables… Having police on the street deters criminals and gives them less opportunity to prey on people*' (Brookwood, 09/03/23).

Similarly, during an interview, a constable reflected on how proactive patrols had curtailed public-space drug dealing in Brookwood:

> 'Before the [police] station was open, there was active dealing in the streets and obviously our patrol reduced that because they're not going to risk a cop seeing what they're doing… Now it's just a less attractive place to commit crimes' (PC2, Brookwood).

Such comments echo research demonstrating positive correlations between targeted patrols and reduced crime levels (Sherman and Weisburd, 1995; Braga and Bond, 2008; Braga et al., 2019). Crucially, they also position patrol work as a means of protecting vulnerable people indirectly, through the crime-reducing effects of police visibility.

More commonly, however, officers emphasised proactive responses centred on initiating direct encounters with vulnerable people themselves. Here, early contact and engagement were seen as ways of preventing emerging risks from escalating. For example, a constable stated that

‘G*etting in early can stop things getting worse… We can actively protect people at risk’* (Whitechurch, 25/03/23). Another similarly remarked:

> ‘*Where we try and police in more of a proactive way, we can get in ahead of something getting out of hand and prevent it spiralling*’ (Whitechurch, 05/06/23).

This early-intervention logic was often highlighted in relation to young people, for whom proactive engagement was seen as providing critical opportunities to prevent issues from developing. As two constables explained:

> ‘I've had some youths where they might be running around town, you know, [a] general nuisance, pestering people…, skipping school and they'll get drawn into that sort of lifestyle. And then for us, we try and engage with them, like intercept initially, before they get to that because it becomes more difficult’ (PC4, Whitechurch).

> ‘*Where kids tend to be so easily led, they can get drawn into stuff really quickly so if we’re not ahead of the game, it’s quite easy to lose our chance of getting them on the right track*’ (Ashgrove, 30/03/23).

These accounts reiterate the interpretation of children and young people as especially vulnerable due to their susceptibility to external influence, as discussed in Chapters Five (5.2.) and Six (6.2.).

The same emphasis on early intervention was applied to the ‘street cohort’. For example:

> ‘If we look at Whitechurch's figures over the years, we've not been seeing increases [in rates of homelessness and rough sleeping] year on year like a lot of other cities… That's because we are getting rid of the new ones quickly and getting them help and sorted out’ (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

These understandings align with the problem-solving orientation of neighbourhood policing described in Chapter Five (5.3.1.), where officers conceptualised their role as aiming to ‘stop the fires from occurring in the first place’ (PC6, Whitechurch) by ‘get[ting] upstream of that demand and negat[ing] it before it really starts to get out of control’ (S1, Whitechurch).

Proactive responses to vulnerable people, again often discussed in relation to patrol work, were also understood as creating opportunities to gather important information. In this sense, proactive patrols functioned not only as engagement or reassurance, but also as a form of community surveillance through which officers could identify, observe and monitor vulnerability. Patrols were described as enabling officers to build an evolving ‘intelligence picture’ (PCSO3, Brookwood) and to ‘monitor vulnerability’ (PCSO2, Ashgrove). As a constable and PCSO explained:

> ‘Lots of times whenever you are patrolling, the public feed us information… I think neighbourhoods is just about going out, talking to people and them giving you information’ (PC7, Ashgrove).

> ‘[Patrols] are one of the main things that we do… There's an intelligence picture that's forever changing… [Y]ou just cast half an eye on who’s visiting, what vehicle’s where, you know, who's doing what’ (PCSO3, Brookwood).

Observational fieldnotes further highlight how proactive work enabled the continuous gathering of information and, as a sergeant put it, keep officers ‘*in the loop*’ (Whitechurch, 14/04/23):

> ‘*When we’re out gathering intel, it’s not that we always do something material off the back of that information. We’ll often just file it away and keep tabs, see if anything develops… Then if someone’s situation changes, you’ll have hopefully been in the loop with things a bit more*’ (Whitechurch, 14/04/23).

This reflects Ericson and Haggerty’s (1997) characterisation of police as ‘knowledge brokers’, whose work involves collecting and processing information. In the context of vulnerability-focused work, proactive patrols therefore operated as surveillance practices through which officers could keep track of individuals, areas and local dynamics deemed relevant to vulnerability and potential harm.

Information gathering was central to vulnerability-focused policing and its problem-solving orientation. As indicated across Chapters Five, Six and Seven, officers consistently explained that understanding and addressing vulnerability-related issues depended on them developing a thorough grasp of the context and complexity of individual situations. The value of proactive responses therefore lay partly in how they enabled officers to accumulate the knowledge needed to understand, monitor and notice changes in people’s circumstances. This contribution is especially significant given officers’ recognition that such information was not always readily visible or immediately available (Chapters Six, 6.3; Seven).

The proactive building of this knowledge base, and the surveillance of particular people and places, was closely tied to distinct features of neighbourhood policing. Several officers described how working proactively, by being visible, accessible and familiar within their local areas, enabled them to foster positive relationships with community members and access the contextual information needed to support vulnerability-focused work. For example:

> ‘… with neighbourhood policing, you can build relationships with children, their parents… I know their parents’ names… I know what their lifestyle at home is’ (PC4, Whitechurch).

> ‘I think for our role in particular, it's about building a relationship with them, having a conversation… If you build up that relationship… then I think you get more out of them that way’ (PCSO2, Ashgrove).

In the context of the ‘street cohort’, a PCSO described how long-term, proactive engagement had enabled him to build trust and rapport with members of this group:

> ‘I have a very good working relationship with the vast majority. They all know me on my first name basis. I know them on a first name basis… I’d almost say they trust me because I’m always there; they know me and they know they can talk to me’ (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

A few officers also emphasised how proactively establishing positive relationships with vulnerable people could shape the tone and effectiveness of future encounters. Rather than first engaging at moments of crisis, early relationship-building was seen to foster familiarity and trust, which could later facilitate cooperation and reduce tension. As a constable described:

> ‘*If you only turn up when things hit the fan then that builds a certain image… If we can get in there before that point then it’s not: “oh police are here because something’s gone wrong”. It’s…: “yeah I know that officer, I can talk to them about stuff”*’ (Ashgrove, 20/03/23).

A PCSO illustrated this point in relation to her relationship with local young people:

> ‘I don't like to go in getting to know kids on my patch as soon as I need to deal with them for something. I like to get in there prior to that… because then, when you have to deal with them, they know… you’re there to make sure they’re safe’ (PCSO2, Ashgrove).

Alongside this information-gathering role, proactive responses were also understood as potentially reducing demand through reassurance. As outlined in Chapter Three (3.3.), reassurance is a traditional core function of neighbourhood policing. In this study, officers described how police-initiated welfare checks could reassure vulnerable people and, in turn, decrease the likelihood of repeated calls for service. As a constable stated:

> ‘*Doing welfare checks on our known vulnerables, it can bring our demand down... If someone’s gone and spoken to them then they’re less likely to be constantly phoning us up… Having that cop turn up at their door on a semi-regular basis can be enough to give that reassurance and keep things ok for them*’ (Ashgrove, 20/04/23).

A sergeant reiterated this point, reflecting upon her own experience:

> ‘There's literally no second-best thing than just engaging with that person… I’d bob into a local alcoholic’s [home]… we'd have a conversation… And when I started doing that, the amount of calls she made to the police plummeted’ (S5, HQ).

Taken together, these accounts suggest that traditional features of neighbourhood policing, particularly visibility, accessibility, familiarity, community engagement and reassurance, were key facilitators of officers’ proactive responses to vulnerable people. The benefits of these principles and practices were understood to extend far beyond crime control. They also encompassed improving police–citizen interactions, enhancing access to information, supporting the monitoring of vulnerable people and places and potentially helping to reduce certain types of repeat police demand.

8.1.1. The potential risks of proactive work: perceptions of over-policing and damaging police-citizen relations

While officers widely regarded proactive responses to vulnerable people as routine and productive, they also recognised that such work carried risks. The well-documented biases embedded within policing cultures and practices, discussed in Chapters Two (2.3.1.) and Seven (7.2.1.), are especially salient in proactive work. Where officers have ‘wide berth to define their own remit and objectives’, there is considerable scope for bias to shape selective decisions about who is approached, monitored or subject to intervention (Vestby, 2024: 109).

Proactive approaches, which are often geographically or demographically targeted, typically concentrate police activity in high-crime areas characterised by deprivation and social marginalisation (Bowling, 1999; Brunson and Weitzer, 2009; Jones, 2014). This can intensify the surveillance of groups already subject to disproportionate police attention, potentially exacerbating negative perceptions and strained police–citizen relations and interactions in such areas. As Rosenbaum (2006: 253) notes, targeted policing, ‘because it has been operationally defined as aggressive enforcement in specific areas, runs the risk of weakening police–community relations’. This relates to longstanding concerns about marginalised groups becoming the routine focus of ‘special police concern’ (Bittner, 1980: 10; Chapter Two, Section 2.3.1.).

Officers occasionally reflected on these tensions in proactive policing. Some discussed how the place-based orientation of neighbourhood policing directed their attention towards high-crime areas, resulting in residents of these areas experiencing more frequent police contact. As two constables explained:

> '*It's our job to focus on high crime hotspots but due to various factors – deep social inequalities and things like that – minority groups are more likely to live in these places… Inevitably they end up seeing and encountering us more often*' (Ashgrove, 02/05/23).

> 'We're more likely to police areas of high crime and if black and ethnic minority people are more likely to be in areas of deprivation, then they're more likely to be in areas of high crime… That's the neighbourhood policing model' (PC3, Whitechurch).

As these comments acknowledge, place-based targeting can become, in practice, the targeting of people within those places. The constable cited above went on to describe how repeated police-initiated encounters could generate negative perceptions over time:

> '[I]f you're an innocent person going about your business, then you're going to feel like you're being targeted… If someone matches the description, [I] might just to talk to them and try and figure out what's going on and confirm their account. To them, they might perceive that as I've picked you out… but actually I'm just trying to figure out whether you're that guy that walked away from that scene… [If] that keeps happening then you're going to be antipolice aren't you?' (PC3, Whitechurch).

Others similarly recognised how 'antipolice' sentiments could intensify among groups regularly subject to police contact and intervention. As a sergeant and PCSO described:

> 'I would say if we're routinely engaging with a group of people – and this is probably a bit damning on the way we deal with people – but I would say that the hostility probably grows. There were 15-year-olds not long ago gathering outside [local high street]… and we kept attending and they became more and more anti[police]' (S1, Whitechurch).

> '*Sometimes the more contact you have, the more they dislike you because they think you're out to get them or something*' (Brookwood, 08/06/23).

These accounts mirror research suggesting that repeated police contact can foster resentment among minority groups towards whom police routinely direct their attention (Sherman and Weisburd, 1995; Brunson and Miller, 2006; Sharp and Atherton, 2007).

Against this backdrop, some officers identified a persistent dilemma. On one hand, proactive work risked reinforcing perceptions of over-policing and mistrust; on the other, failing to act proactively was understood as potentially allowing harm and vulnerability to go undetected and unaddressed. Among those who described this challenge, one sergeant stated, 'we're always stuck between a rock and a hard place. It's always a balancing act' (S1, Whitechurch).

An inspector similarly reflected on this dilemma in relation to the stop and search of people from ethnically minoritised groups:

> ‘People from the black community are more likely to be stopped-searched… but they’re also more likely victims… It’s really complex, and I think we’re damned if we do, we’re damned if we don't’ (I4, HQ).

Such accounts highlight a central tension in neighbourhood policing, and policing more broadly. While proactive practices may be rooted in efforts to enhance public reassurance and foster positive police–citizen relationships, they may also, when experienced as excessive or unjustified, prove counterproductive and damage perceptions of the police. This reflects Vestby’s (2024: 122) observation of the dual nature of proactive work, where ‘prevention’ can encompass both coercive and disruptive strategies and more traditional ‘soft’ preventive approaches.

In response to these risks, a constable described making a particular effort to communicate and explain his actions to those he encountered, in order to reduce the potential harms of proactive police-initiated contact:

> ‘I just feel like I… go that extra way to sort of reassure… I'm conscious of how race plays into things and also my potential unconscious bias... I do try and then address it even just by talking to people and it can be really positive when you do and sort of explain things…’ (PC3, Whitechurch).

This reflects an attempt to align proactive policing with principles of procedural justice, as discussed in Chapter Seven (7.3.1.). As the literature suggests, perceptions of fairness, respect and quality of treatment during police encounters may shape people’s sense of police legitimacy and willingness to cooperate more strongly than the outcome of the encounter itself (Tyler, 1990; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Mazerolle et al., 2013). On this logic, while communication cannot resolve all the tensions involved in proactive policing, officers’ explanations of their actions may help mitigate some of the negative effects associated with such encounters.

8.1.2. Section summary

This section has explored proactive work as a central mechanism through which neighbourhood officers responded to vulnerable people. Officers consistently emphasised how initiating direct contact with vulnerable people could prevent problems from materialising and help them accumulate the information needed to understand and monitor vulnerability

effectively. These practices were closely intertwined with core neighbourhood policing principles, including visibility, accessibility, familiarity and reassurance, which were often understood as conducive to fostering positive police encounters and relationships with vulnerable people and, in some cases, to reducing vulnerability-related demand.

At the same time, officers' accounts reveal the double-edged nature of proactive policing. Because place-based approaches to crime and community problems tended to concentrate attention on deprived areas in which marginalised communities often reside, they risked contributing to perceptions of over-policing and mistrust in the police among such communities. This implication required officers to negotiate the potential benefits of proactive practices alongside the need to maintain perceptions of police fairness and legitimacy.

8.2. Immediate reactive responses to vulnerable people

Not all responses to vulnerable people were proactive. In many instances, officers' actions were reactive, arising in direct response to situations as they unfolded. These responses were triggered either by citizens' requests for police involvement or by officers themselves when they encountered situations they deemed to require intervention. In either case, such responses were characterised by immediacy, with officers responding in real time to circumstances perceived to involve crisis, distress and/or heightened risk. This section examines the main themes that emerged across officers' immediate reactive responses.

8.2.1. Responding 'softly and slowly' to de-escalate situations

A central feature of officers' immediate reactive work involved de-escalating situations by responding '*softly and slowly*' (Ashgrove, 01/03/23). It is important to acknowledge, however, that reactive police involvement was not always considered conducive to de-escalation. As outlined in Chapter Five (5.3.2.2.), several officers recognised that their interventions could, in some circumstances, inflame already volatile situations. This section, however, focuses on interventions carried out on the supposition that police involvement would help diffuse, rather than worsen, tensions.

Officers repeatedly emphasised engagement as their primary tool for de-escalating high-risk encounters. References to working 'softly and slowly' did not imply delaying action where urgent intervention was required. Rather, officers used this phrase to describe a less enforcement-led style of intervention in which time, space and communication were used to

reduce tension and prevent escalation where a situation could be safely contained. As a constable and PCSO explained:

> '*We try and approach things more softly and slowly in neighbourhoods… Where response might just turn up, do something short-term and leave, we take our time to chat to people and diffuse the situation*' (Ashgrove, 01/03/23).

> '*A lot of the time it's a case of us sitting down and talking to someone. That can really calm them down and help take them out of that deep crisis moment*' (Ashgrove, 06/06/23).

A constable similarly explained how, when it was safe to do so, giving a person in crisis more time and space could de-escalate matters by creating opportunities to 'talk them down' (PC8, Ashgrove):

> '… if they are very erratic, if they are very what I describe as "pumped up", so physically tense… I might just give them a little bit more time and space because as long as we are in what I call a safe working environment… we can give them a little bit more time and talk through it and talk them down' (PC8, Ashgrove).

These comments position communication as a reactive tactic for reducing tension and stabilising situations. They align with literature on de-escalation as a set of verbal and tactical strategies designed to slow down events, prevent issues from intensifying and create safer outcomes for those involved (Engel et al., 2020; 2022; White et al., 2023). However, slower-paced, engagement-led interventions were not presented as appropriate in all high-risk situations. As Section 8.2.3. discusses, some encounters involving vulnerability were understood, to borrow Bittner's (1970: 41) phrase, as 'non-negotiably coercible' and requiring enforcement. Nonetheless, officers' accounts still suggest that, at least in some circumstances, neighbourhood policing's emphasis on engagement and slower-paced work could help de-escalate tense situations.

Officers also described communication with vulnerable people in crisis as a means of providing immediate reassurance. Here, reassurance referred less to guaranteeing safety or resolving the underlying problem, and more to making a person feel heard, less alone and supported in the moment. For example, a PCSO reflected on how many vulnerable people responded positively to patient, non-judgemental engagement:

> 'A lot of vulnerable people might not want to tell friends or family because they might feel like a burden, whereas they see us as doing this job because we genuinely want to help… We are given the time to commit to people and just go "right, start from the beginning. We've got as much time as you want"… I think they breathe then…

> Sometimes just knowing that you're there and you've acknowledged it… That can offer a lot of reassurance' (PCSO2, Ashgrove).

Likewise, a constable described:

> '*So much of this job is about talking and listening… You have to give people the chance to say what they want… If… they feel heard and know that you've given them your time, that can bring them and the situation right down and get it under control much quicker*' (Ashgrove, 30/03/23).

A PCSO emphasised how even brief engagements could offer meaningful support:

> 'If you've had a chat to an old lady for 5 minutes that was feeling very low and vulnerable… just a five-minute chat can make a world the difference… That could mean everything to that one person' (PCSO1, Ashgrove).

These comments demonstrate how reassurance, discussed earlier as a proactive response to vulnerable people (8.1.), also operated as a valuable reactive intervention capable of reducing immediate distress. Its value lay not necessarily in removing risk factors or resolving a person's vulnerability, but in helping to temporarily stabilise a person's emotional state through presence, recognition and support. This process was demonstrated during observational fieldwork, where a PCSO engaged in a 30-minute conversation with a member of the 'street cohort' who had become visibly upset following her partner's remand into custody. Throughout the conversation, the PCSO encouraged the woman to talk with comments such as '*I'm here to listen. You talk and get everything off your chest*' and '*I've got all the time in the world. Go ahead, please*'. The woman expressed deep appreciation, replying: '*It helps so much to talk to someone. I've got no one to talk to now he's gone away so thank you for your time*' (Whitechurch, 19/04/23).

The emphasis on listening as an immediate response resonates with official guidance encouraging officers to use 'active listening… throughout an encounter' to enhance safety (COP, 2020). It also reflects neighbourhood policing guidance stressing the importance of officers 'listening to and being more responsive to people's needs' (COP, 2019: 4), and links to the literature exploring active listening and communication as instrumental tools in crisis negotiation (Hammer and Rogan, 1997; Royce, 2005).

A further dimension of officers' immediate reactive responses involved showing respect to those they encountered. As two constables described, respectful treatment was deemed essential to officers' ability to diffuse immediate crises:

'*In situations with vulnerable people… it helps calm things down tenfold if they feel that you're treating them with respect*' (Whitechurch, 27/01/23).

'*If you can make them feel respected then you're way more likely to get through to them and have success. Without that, you're on the backfoot… Things will only get worse*' (Ashgrove, 08/06/23).

A PCSO similarly emphasised the importance of respect in his approach to the 'street cohort':

'*I'm here to listen and help them. End of the day, they're just people. All human beings deserve respect… I make sure I speak to them like ordinary folk, because they are*…' (Whitechurch, 08/04/23).

Recognising the value of respect in police–citizen interactions reflects Schaefer Morabito's (2014: 208) claim that vulnerable people view police encounters more favourably when officers act 'with respect and dignity'. Such acknowledgements also align with procedural justice literature showing that respectful treatment shapes perceptions of legitimacy and willingness to cooperate. As Skinns et al. (2020: 1668; 1685) argue, dignity in police work is both 'a critical antecedent of police legitimacy' and 'an important end in itself'.

Officers' reactive responses to vulnerable people in high-risk situations were framed not only as a means of managing immediate risk, but also as interventions that could, in some cases, produce longer-term benefits. Two officers during their interviews recounted past experiences in which reactive, support-focused engagement with young people – one involved in gangs and another a regular missing person – was seen as having possibly contributed to longer-term improvements:

'There was a kid that was definitely getting into gangs and things like this and had knives in his bedroom… He ultimately had stormed out of the house… and when I went to speak to him, it was all kind of "gangstery" "fuck off" kind of talk until… I started to talk to him about his mother's perspective… And as soon as he started to realise that then we were able to get him home and to talk to his mum… It takes time to sit a kid down and make them realise "this is the path you're on"… and every now and then I've been able to do that with people' (PC3, Whitechurch).

'There was a young girl who was a regular missing person… I found her once and on the way home, I was having a conversation with her about what would happen… I was explaining how, if she went into local authority care through her continued behaviour then, up to the age of 18, she wouldn't really be able to do what she wanted to do... And I think the conversation we had…, she was engaging with me, I was engaging with her and her missing episodes reduced drastically after that… I don't

know if she felt like she'd been listened to… I just think it's about having that time' (CI, HQ).

These examples suggest that immediate reactive responses, when grounded in patient, respectful engagement, could both de-escalate situations and potentially contribute to longer-term positive outcomes. While Section 8.3. examines officers' long-term responses in detail, the reflections here indicate that initial reactive work could lay important groundwork for sustaining later longer-term benefits. They also show that slower-paced, communication-focused interventions, closely associated with neighbourhood policing's style of practice, formed a key part of how officers sought to stabilise situations and support vulnerable people in moments of immediate need.

8.2.2. Delivering on-the-spot short-term 'problem-solving'

A recurring theme in officers' immediate reactive responses to vulnerable people was an orientation towards practical, short-term 'problem-solving'. There is, of course, some contradiction in this framing: to 'solve' a problem only in the short term is not to resolve it in a comprehensive or lasting sense. However, the phrase captures how officers sought to temporarily stabilise or alleviate immediate difficulties, even where the underlying conditions producing vulnerability remained unresolved. As outlined in Chapter Five (5.3.1.1.), officers commonly interpreted neighbourhood policing as a problem-solving model. Although they recognised limits in their ability to provide comprehensive or long-term solutions to vulnerability-related problems – a point revisited in Sections 8.3. and 8.4. – they nonetheless engaged in a range of reactive interventions aimed at improving individuals' immediate circumstances. As a PCSO and constable described:

> '*Sometimes it's about seeing someone and just thinking "What do they need? What would help them right now?"*' (Whitechurch, 04/04/23).

> '*Sometimes people have been through so much shit that when you come across them, your main thought might be just "how can I help? How can I make their current situation a bit better?"*' (Ashgrove, 24/05/23).

In the same vein, a constable explained:

> 'I and pretty much most other [officers] will always go in with an attitude of "look, let's try to sort this out. Let's try and help you" in whatever situation' (PC6, Whitechurch).

Interventions based on short-term 'problem-solving' generally involved officers making on-the-spot, pragmatic assessments of a person's needs and providing tangible assistance to alleviate immediate hardship. These accounts reflect the conceptualisation of vulnerability as a condition signalling immediate need and justifying intervention. As a constable stated:

> 'I just try and improve the situation… Sometimes you come across people without any shoes on… and it's just like if we can get you a pair of shoes then at least we've made something slightly better' (PC5, Whitechurch).

Responses of this kind surfaced during observational fieldwork. For example, a PCSO described helping a man who had recently been placed in hostel accommodation after a long period of homelessness:

> '*I bumped into Steven a few days after he'd been put up and he was telling me about how this place had given him this tinned food but he had no way of getting into it – no tin opener and no money to buy a tin opener, so I bought him one. That seemed to me an obvious way of helping him… He was over the moon … You'd have thought I'd given him a winning lottery ticket… To him, that meant the world*' (Whitechurch, 19/04/23).

Similar accounts were shared during interviews, where officers described offering practical, short-term assistance intended to improve a vulnerable person's immediate situation:

> 'We went to a job called in as an immediate shoplifting: some guy refusing to pay for food… He said he was doing that because he didn't have any food at home… So then I'm just Googling it and I start ringing food banks… We managed to find a church… so we drove him there, got him some food and then took him home' (PC5, Whitechurch).

A chief inspector reflected on a comparable case, also involving attempted shoplifting but this time by a man staying in a bail hostel after recently being released from prison:

> '[A]ll he had stolen was a sandwich… He'd explained why he did it. It was a Friday and he said, "I don't have any money… and I'm facing the entire weekend with no food"… I couldn't bear the thought of him not having anything to eat all weekend, so I then went to a local supermarket and bought some bread and some ham and some butter and I took it to him… I just think, from a vulnerability point of view, to help him try and get on his feet, he needed things like that… so that got him through the weekend and stopped him committing further crimes… It might have changed the cycle… I don't actually know if he ever got in trouble again and I'm not going to claim

> that that took him straight out of the criminal justice system, but I certainly didn't deal with him again' (CI1, HQ).

The chief inspector's suggestion that supportive, short-term intervention may have 'changed the cycle' (CI1, HQ) is important because it reinforces the possibility that immediate reactive responses can produce longer-term benefits (8.2.1.). Other officers, however, emphasised that while such reactive practices might stabilise a situation temporarily, they did not necessarily resolve the underlying drivers of vulnerability. As one constable stated, 'we try and do long term problem solving, but… we can't give people much' (PC5, Whitechurch).

Awareness of officers' capacity to provide primarily short-term support was evident during fieldwork. In one example, two constables bought a member of the 'street cohort' a hot drink on a cold winter day. Afterwards, one reflected:

> '*Us stepping in, doing stuff like this, it doesn't make people's problems go away but it can provide that bit of help in the interim. That's all we can do really… This stuff isn't even our job in the first plac*e' (Whitechurch, 27/01/23).

The significance of this comment lies not only in its emphasis on officers' ability to provide only short-term assistance, but also in the assertion that such work '*isn't even our job in the first place*' (Whitechurch, 27/01/23). This sentiment reflects the tensions highlighted in Chapter Five (5.3.2.2.) in terms of the police's increasing involvement in vulnerability-related matters and the extent to which this involvement is appropriate and productive. Several officers explicitly recognised that the work involved in their immediate problem-solving responses to vulnerable people could fall outside their intended mandate. As a sergeant and inspector considered:

> '*Sometimes… we end up doing all manner of things that aren't necessarily our job, just to try and help*' (Brookwood, 19/06/23).

> 'We do more stuff than my chief constable even knows… Some of the work we do… it's not a police job' (I2, Ashgrove).

The accounts in this section demonstrate how officers' immediate responses to vulnerable people were shaped by a pragmatic orientation towards short-term 'problem-solving'. When faced with individuals perceived to be in need, officers often prioritised practical interventions aimed at improving immediate circumstances and providing temporary relief. While such actions were sometimes seen as an '*obvious way of helping*' (Whitechurch, 19/04/23), multiple officers also reflected on how they could blur, stretch and potentially exceed the parameters of their remit. In practice, officers appeared willing to do whatever seemed reasonable in the circumstances to address the immediate issue before them, reflecting a broad understanding of

police work as intervention in situations where something needs to be done urgently (Bittner, 1974; Chapter Two, 2.3.1.). Such responses also align with literature suggesting that the police are increasingly stepping in to address a growing range of harms and social issues beyond the traditional boundaries of police work (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021; Loader, 2020; Crawford, 2024).

The data above reinforce a broader tension identified throughout this thesis regarding how the focus on vulnerability can draw officers into domains for which policing, both within neighbourhood policing and across the institution more broadly, is neither designed nor adequately resourced. Thus, while short-term 'problem-solving' interventions may alleviate immediate difficulties, and may even contribute to longer-term benefits, they also reveal the limits of a policing model increasingly tasked with responding to complex social problems.

8.2.3. Using enforcement to manage risk and safeguard vulnerable people

While most immediate responses to vulnerable people centred on engagement, de-escalation and on-the-spot problem-solving, some involved enforcement as a strategy for managing imminent risk. This included situations where officers perceived a risk of harm to the vulnerable person, to officers or to other citizens. In such circumstances, enforcement was framed less as a straightforwardly punitive response and more as a means of officers' containing danger, regaining control and preventing further escalation.

Enforcement measures, such as arrest and detention, can fall disproportionately on vulnerable groups and may, in various ways, intensify their vulnerability (HMIC, 2015b; Bustamante, 2019; Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021; Hough, 2021). As discussed in Chapter Five (5.3.2.2.), officers in this study recognised that police intervention could further distress and '*trigger*' vulnerable individuals already in crisis (Whitechurch, 15/02/23). They also highlighted the limitations of enforcement as a response to vulnerable people, as Section 8.3.2. explores.

Nonetheless, within the context of immediate reactive work, several officers described situations in which enforcement was deemed necessary. This was particularly the case where officers felt they were facing serious or potentially serious risk and, as a PCSO phrased it, '*when you've tried talking them down but things are only getting worse*' (Brookwood, 08/06/23). Two constables similarly explained:

'*It's not something we want to do but sometimes you have to... If arrest would help manage [serious risk] then sometimes you have to make that call*' (Whitechurch, 27/01/23).

'Arresting someone is most often a way of preventing issues… To arrest someone is to reduce another risk' (PC3, Whitechurch).

This framing of enforcement as, in some cases, necessary resonates with the distinctive coercive capabilities of policing (Wilson, 1968; Lipsky, 1980). Tasked with responding to situations 'that-ought-not-to-be-happening-and-about-which-someone-had-better-dosomething-now', the police role is underpinned by officers' authorised capacity to use force when deemed necessary (Bittner, 1990: 249). While officers in this study often emphasised communication and informal resolution as ways of de-escalating high-risk situations, they also recognised that their role involved judging when such approaches were no longer sufficient and coercive intervention was required. In practice, this threshold was most often associated with immediate and serious harm. For example:

'If they're going to hurt themselves immediately or if they're going to hurt someone else immediately, as cops we've got to take action and… deal with it' (PC8, Ashgrove). A sergeant similarly explained:

'*[I]f you've got someone waving a knife about, getting them in cuffs might be the best course of action for everyone in that moment, including that person who's vulnerable themselves*' (Whitechurch, 28/06/23).

Here, enforcement was framed less as punishment than as an urgent safeguarding intervention. It reflected a form of protective coercion, whereby force was considered legitimate because of its perceived capacity to contain risk and prevent further harm. However, as Section 8.3.2. explores, this was not the only way officers understood coercive intervention; some also interpreted it in more punitive terms, as a means of encouraging behaviour change.

The use of enforcement as safeguarding, justified through the perceived need to control immediate risk posed either/both to and by a vulnerable person, was also evident during an observed encounter in which a person experiencing psychosis was arrested. The constable making the arrest told the man: '*we're handcuffing you for your safety and our safety, because you've told us you've got a knife*'. A brief exchange then followed between other officers. One stated, '*He's a threat to himself… he's at high risk of harm', to which another responded, 'let's take him inside [the police station] – safest place for him right now*' (Whitechurch, 14/04/23).

Further examples reinforced the conceptualisation of enforcement as a route to safeguarding. One constable outlined the possible immediate safeguarding benefits of remanding a vulnerable person in prison:

> ‘As daft as it sounds, the easiest way to safeguard them is actually to get them remanded into prison, because once they are… they are in the “secure state”… because, actually, they're not going to be impacted by organised crime groups as much; they’re not going to be lured in; they’re going to have three meals a day, a roof over their head’ (PC8, Ashgrove).

On another occasion, a constable described custody as potentially offering a temporary reprieve for a member of the ‘street cohort’ in active alcohol addiction, providing her with an opportunity to ‘dry out’ (PC6, Whitechurch):

> ‘Because she gets involved in so many incidents where she's either assaulting people, damaging things, or she's being assaulted, you know, or worse, the only way to remove that kind of vulnerability is potentially a spell in custody where she can dry out’ (PC6, Whitechurch).

The accounts in this section reveal how enforcement was positioned as a means of urgently removing individuals from harmful situations, managing immediate risk and preventing further victimisation. In this sense, it was framed not primarily as punitive, but as protective, at times understood as ‘*the best course of action for… [a] person who’s vulnerable themselves*’ (Whitechurch, 28/06/23). Crucially, such interventions were described as necessary only in a limited set of high-risk scenarios deemed to fall within the distinctive remit of policing. These accounts therefore highlight officers’ sense of responsibility to deploy force where other responses were judged insufficient to secure immediate safety.

8.2.4. Section summary

This section examined three key approaches shaping officers’ immediate responses to vulnerable people. Officers most often relied on communication-led strategies that focused on slowing situations down, listening and treating people with respect in order to reduce immediate risk and stabilise moments of crisis. Alongside these practices, they sometimes engaged in quick, pragmatic problem-solving aimed at alleviating immediate hardship, even if only temporarily. Although enforcement was used less frequently than these ‘softer’ activities, it was sometimes framed and implemented as a necessary means of managing risk and safeguarding vulnerable individuals.

The accounts presented here show that officers' immediate responses were needs-focused and shaped by their assessments of individual situations. At times, officers felt that responding to the perceived needs of vulnerable people pushed them beyond the boundaries of their intended remit. They also recognised that their reactive interventions, while sometimes capable of offering short-term help, were rarely able to address the deeper causes and conditions of vulnerability.

8.3. Long-term responses to vulnerable people

Alongside the proactive and immediate reactive practices discussed so far, some responses to vulnerable people were longer-term in orientation. Here, the focus shifted from securing short-term stability towards sustaining involvement in ways intended to encourage more durable change in the circumstances or behaviours associated with ongoing risk and harm. This section examines these longer-term responses and explores how officers conceptualised their role and capacity in delivering them.

8.3.1. Tailoring responses and offering support to vulnerable people

Many long-term responses to vulnerable people were support-orientated, extending beyond immediate crisis management to connect individuals with further help, monitor ongoing risk and address the wider circumstances underpinning their vulnerability. Such responses included safeguarding referrals, signposting to partner agencies, welfare checks and follow-up visits aimed at addressing recurring vulnerability-related concerns.

Officers often described these interventions as needing to be tailored to the individual, with the police response shaped by the person's circumstances, risks and perceived needs. This informed decisions about whether and how officers should intervene, what information or advice they should provide, whether safeguarding concerns should be submitted and which referrals should be made to other agencies. As one sergeant explained, '*What we do has to fit with the situation… [Police response] depends on the person and the case*' (Brookwood, 08/06/23). A chief inspector similarly stated:

> 'We try to move away from setting investigation plans that are copy and paste because they need to be specific and bespoke to individuals and the circumstances' (CI1, HQ).

An inspector framed this as part of a broader shift in contemporary policing:

> ‘It’s tailored to the individual now as opposed to “this is the criteria. If you do this, this happens”... The policing approach is now definitely more tailored than it would have been previously’ (I4, HQ).

For several officers, tailoring responses to specific individuals was seen as essential to achieving effective and sustainable outcomes. Without this, interventions were expected to produce only temporary progress, if any. As one sergeant suggested, failure to tailor responses ‘*means we end up back where we started*’ (Brookwood, 08/06/23). A constable similarly explained:

> ‘[I]t’s important that… we make sure that person gets the tailored support that they need… because if not, we'll be back in the same position in two, three or four weeks’ time’ (PC8, Ashgrove).

The emphasis on tailoring interventions reflects a problem-solving vulnerability lens, under which behaviours traditionally framed as ‘problematic’ are instead interpreted as symptoms of deeper vulnerability-related conditions (Chapter Five, 5.2.). From this perspective, it was understood that interventions needed to reflect the specific circumstances of individual cases in order to engage with, and ideally address, the underlying causes of the issue.

Officers consistently emphasised that longer-term, support-based interventions depended on some degree of engagement and acceptance from the individuals concerned. Where people were perceived as unwilling or unable to cooperate, officers understood their capacity to help and support such individuals as limited. A constable and inspector illustrated how assessments of a person’s response to initial police engagement shaped what action, if any, could realistically follow:

> ‘[T]he big thing is… whether people want to change as well. If they don’t want to change then there’s no point’ (PC5, Whitechurch).

> ‘[Our approach] is “you've done this. Let's have a look here. Are you engaging? Will us actually talking to you and referring you, will you engage with it? Because if you’re not going to engage, there’s no point…”’ (I4, HQ).

As these comments imply, autonomy, particularly people’s right to accept or refuse support, emerged as an important dimension of officers’ responses. Previous research has found that interventions targeting vulnerability can be paternalistic and disempowering, sometimes resting on assumptions that practitioners ‘know better’ than service recipients (Dunn et al., 2008; Fawcett, 2009; Brown, 2015). In this study, however, officers regularly emphasised the importance of accepting people’s choices when determining appropriate responses. As a sergeant and inspector described:

> '*Part of our response has to be being okay with that fact that some people want to live a certain way, and we can't necessarily change that*' (Brookwood, 08/06/23).

> 'Some people like living in a certain way… and they're entitled to… They've got the right to make poor decisions, so if they want to take drugs… they will… If they want to live in squalor, that's their choice. It's not for me to say, "no you [can't]"' (I2, Ashgrove).

This recognition that people retain, within reason, choice over their lifestyle, even where those choices conflicted with officers' understandings of safety or wellbeing, was echoed by a constable reflecting on his repeated attempts to offer support to a sex worker:

> '*I've tried saying, "let's turn your life around. Things could be so much better if you took some help", but she's not obliged to listen to me... She's got to want to change. It's just not my call to make*' (Ashgrove, 20/04/23).

This emphasis on autonomy is especially significant when read alongside the vulnerability lens discussed in Chapter Five (5.2.1.), through which officers routinely interpreted certain behaviours and lifestyles as shaped by constrained agency. Yet, as illustrated above, when assessing the scope for longer-term intervention, officers often emphasised the need to accept individuals' choices. In practice, then, two understandings surfaced simultaneously: that people's behaviour may be shaped by constrained agency, and that officers should nonetheless recognise their right to decide how they live and whether they engage with support. These accounts therefore suggest that, in some cases, officers did not see constrained agency as negating a person's right to refuse intervention.

Officers occasionally reflected on possible reasons as to why people did or did not accept support from services. In such cases, they highlighted deep-rooted factors relating to a person's internal motivation, or lack thereof, to change their circumstances. This perception was illustrated during observational fieldwork, when officers encountered a man described by a constable as someone who had been '*in and out the system for a long time*' (Ashgrove, 30/03/23), squatting in an abandoned flat where he had spent several days using drugs heavily:

> *As a constable looks around the flat, she says, 'Oh no Chris… I thought you were getting clean, sorting yourself out for your kids?'. The man shrugs and, with a chuckle, replies, 'Ha, yeah I was but…'. He trails off. Chris is made to leave the flat, which is then boarded up by officers. Afterwards, one constable reflects, 'He absolutely loves his life… He won't change what he's doing because he's happy doing it'. Another responds, 'Absolutely. Unless he finds a reason to change, he'll just keep on'* (Ashgrove, 30/03/23).

This interaction captured a relatively common understanding among officers: that long-term change depended on an individual '*find[ing] a reason to change*' (Ashgrove, 30/03/23). An inspector reiterated this point in relation to a woman caught in what he described as a cycle of 'drugs, then sex work to pay for drugs, more offending…' (I2, Ashgrove):

> 'She might say at one day "get me to detox and rehab"… But the reality is… unless she's got something different to open her eyes for in the morning, within hours she'll revert to what she did before. So, if you don't change the aspirational side of that – give her something to wake up for – you'll fail. You'll just go back round that merry-go-round' (I2, Ashgrove).

These accounts suggest that the complex situations experienced by vulnerable people could not be resolved through service provision alone. Without a shift in the deeper systems and structures that provide individuals with, as the inspector above phrased it, 'something to wake up for' (I2, Ashgrove), the scope for sustained progress was considered limited.

Within this context, officers were acutely aware of their own limits in motivating or effecting change. Several emphasised the gap between what they could realistically achieve as neighbourhood officers and the deeper conditions required to secure lasting improvements. For example:

> 'We just police the symptoms [of vulnerability]… We're not the one that's going to solve that problem. We're not the experts… I can't prescribe you what you need. I can't give you therapy' (PC3, Whitechurch).

> 'The solution to really reducing someone's vulnerability long term is the support network around them; it's somewhere stable to live, it's stopping them… from being addicted to substances… You need them to have key workers. You need them to have somewhere safe to live. You need them to have money. You need them to have food. And we can't give that' (PC5, Whitechurch).

Such reflections highlight the limits of policing in addressing the deep-rooted social problems that create and compound conditions of vulnerability (Chapter Two). They also reiterate a tension outlined in Chapter Five (5.3.2.), where many officers understood themselves as lacking the tools, resources and training required to meet fully the demands of vulnerability-focused work.

Despite recognising the limits of their ability to deliver the sustained support vulnerable people may require, several officers stressed that their contribution lay in offering support wherever possible. A PCSO and a constable described this distinction between *providing* support, which

was seen as beyond their capability, and *offering* support, which was understood as within their remit:

> '*[W]e're limited in what we can provide… We let people know what's available and the support that's out there… and keep offering that as a channel they can take when they're ready*' (Whitechurch 04/04/23).

> '*We can offer things to people but a) we can't force them to do anything and b) we can't give the service itself… We're here to make people aware of their options*' (Whitechurch, 27/01/23).

This emphasis on encouraging people to accept support, usually from other services rather than the police, translated into a practice of persistent, low-level encouragement, described by a constable as 'chipping away and… badgering' individuals to accept help (PC6, Whitechurch). While recognising that they could not compel engagement, several officers hoped that repeated and patient offers of support would eventually coincide with an individual's readiness to accept help. A PCSO and inspector illustrated this sense of ongoing responsibility:

> 'After years and years of badgering them… it's me going "come on, there's help here. Take it"…, and then one day they say, "we are ready for it"' (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

> 'We need to make sure… they know [support] is always there… If they're alright living in squalor, they've got a bit of food in the fridge then all I say to them is "I'm here for you. Here's my contact details, here's the emails, addresses, here's everything you need"… [I]f somebody dies in squalor and they're surrounded by leaflets for drug and alcohol [services] then I've done as much as I can' (I2, Ashgrove).

The accounts in this section demonstrate how officers understood longer-term responses to vulnerable people as grounded in tailored and individualised approaches. Two key constraints shaped their involvement in this work: individuals' willingness or ability to engage, and the limited capacity of police to deliver the forms of long-term support required. Against this backdrop, officers broadly conceptualised their role as ensuring that individuals were aware of their options and able to access help should they choose to engage.

Where officers were aware of their own limits in responding to vulnerable people, the need for other agencies and a wider system capable of delivering sustained support became clear. Section 8.4. explores this issue by examining the role and contribution of partnership responses to vulnerable people. Before then, however, the use of enforcement as a long-term approach is explored.

8.3.2. The use of enforcement in long-term responses to vulnerable people

This section examines enforcement as a means of responding to vulnerable people. As with the framing of enforcement in immediate reactive work (8.2.3.), officers positioned enforcement within long-term responses as an escalatory measure. However, in this context, the rationale shifted: rather than solely seeking to manage high levels of immediate risk, enforcement was used to create a 'cost' to offending, deter continued harmful behaviour and incentivise engagement with support.

The first point to note is that officers consistently positioned enforcement as markedly less desirable than support-orientated, tailored interventions. While support was described as the route to meaningful and sustainable problem-solving, enforcement was widely understood as limited in its capacity to address the underlying vulnerability-related conditions that might drive people's behaviours. As a sergeant said, '[We] always look at… support… as opposed to enforcement' (S1, Whitechurch). A PCSO similarly noted, 'It's a lot easier to talk to somebody and try to help them than it is to lock them up and just delay the problem' (PCSO4, Whitechurch). An inspector reiterated:

> '[Enforcement] is never going to solve their issues… It's about picking those vulnerabilities out… and trying to see if there's some way of supporting them around that' (I1, Brookwood).

These accounts demonstrate how support-orientated responses were viewed as the most effective long-term interventions. By contrast, enforcement was considered a temporary or partial response.

Officers also recognised that enforcement could be counterproductive, with the potential 'to make things worse' (PC6, Whitechurch). In the context of begging, for example, a PCSO described how enforcement would not only fail to resolve the problem, but might compound it:

> 'We try and go out of our way not to criminalise people… We're just not using the sledgehammer to crack the nut… If people were locked up for begging… they've not got any money to pay a fine, so we're not solving the problem. We're adding to it [so] they've got even more debt' (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

Similar concerns were raised in relation to children and young people, where enforcement was seen as carrying long-term consequences capable of producing further harms:

> ‘[W]e don't want to criminalise children; everything we do potentially has an effect for them, for their life and the security of their future’ (PC7, Ashgrove).

Where officers acknowledged the limits and risks of enforcement, their reflections echoed wider research documenting the harms associated with criminal justice involvement for vulnerable people (Corston, 2007; Bradley, 2009; Edgar and Rickford, 2009).

Despite being framed as a generally undesirable long-term response, enforcement was also understood as a necessary measure of last resort, reserved for cases where alternatives had ‘failed to provide a solution’ (Vestby, 2024: 107). For example:

> ‘You have to give them every opportunity – help them, support them, and do everything you can, but at some point you need to take the enforcement route’ (I4, HQ).

> ‘If they don't stop, it has to go down the criminal route, but it's our last resort. We try everything else before we go down that road’ (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

This logic was particularly pronounced in relation to young people. Several officers stressed the importance of prioritising non-enforcement interventions until behaviour escalated to a point at which enforcement became justified. As a sergeant and inspector explained:

> ‘… we wouldn't be prosecuting kids involved in low-level ASB unless they are starting to escalate their behaviour. We would want to put some interventions in place before jumping to prosecution. It would always be an escalation’ (S1, Whitechurch).

> ‘We’ve got to be proportionate and we're not going to arrest them… the first time they step across that line. And that’s why we have this escalatory approach… It takes time to build up to us actually taking more formal action because we give them those chances to learn from mistakes’ (I1, Brookwood).

The emphasis on exhausting other avenues before resorting to coercion reflects Reiner’s (2010: 144) assertion that ‘[t]he craft of effective policing is to use the background possibility of legitimate coercion so skilfully that it never needs to be foregrounded’. It also resonates with nudge theory, which suggests that techniques can be used to ‘persuade people to adopt healthy behaviour… and compliance with a range of regulations’ (Hough, 2021: 75). Originally coined by Thaler and Sunstein (2008: 6), nudges are defined as ‘any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives’. In this framing, the possibility of enforcement operates as a behavioural nudge, seeking to reshape choices and encourage compliance without necessarily being routinely deployed.

The framing of enforcement as an escalatory measure also resonates with Braithwaite's (1997) model of responsive regulation, conceptualised as 'speaking softly and carrying big sticks'. Braithwaite advocates a graduated approach in which authorities begin with the least intrusive measures, such as persuasion and support, and escalate only when these fail. Aligning with this logic, officers' emphasis on support-orientated responses reflected the attempt to start 'softly', seeking voluntary compliance and behavioural change. At the same time, their insistence on retaining enforcement as a credible backstop corresponds to the 'big stick', described by one officer as 'a necessary evil' (PC6, Whitechurch), to be used where softer approaches had failed. As a sergeant explained:

> 'There has to come a point where your offending history has become too much and we need to formally do something with you… A lot of these people – especially the "street cohort" and the youths who are the real problem – will have been through the processes hundreds of times. [A]t that point, you've really got to say… [they] probably need to start getting criminalised' (S4, Whitechurch).

The use of enforcement was not only understood as an escalatory response after other avenues had failed, but also as a deterrent designed to disincentivise offending and encourage individuals to take up support. In this sense, behaviour was interpreted through a cost–benefit lens, with enforcement operating to increase the 'cost' of offending. As a constable explained:

> 'I generally think it's a cost–benefit analysis for people: "If I can get away with this and carry on taking drugs that I like, I'll do it. And if the cost gets too high, I might then consider the treatment... But if the cost isn't there, it's much easier to stay what I'm doing"… [T]hat ties into vulnerability, because people do these things for a reason... It's to feed a habit generally, massively. And that needs treating but that can only ever be treated if they actually want it to happen. And so there has to be cost' (PC3, Whitechurch).

This comment frames enforcement as a tool for shaping behaviour by altering the perceived consequences attached to it. In doing so, it draws on principles of rational choice theory, in which individuals are understood as weighing costs and benefits to maximise personal advantage (Clarke and Cornish, 1985). It assumes that people are self-interested, possess stable preferences and have sufficient information to evaluate likely outcomes; in essence, that individuals are 'responsive to incentives' (Thomas et al., 2020: 486). From this perspective, enforcement functions to raise the cost of offending in order to encourage compliance and engagement with support.

However, as discussed in Chapter Five (5.2.) and then revisited in Section 8.3.1., a vulnerability-orientated approach interprets 'problem' behaviour as shaped by wider factors

that may constrain individual agency. While officers recognised behaviour as often driven by deep-rooted vulnerabilities, their justifications for enforcement as an escalatory measure reintroduced elements of agency and responsibility, particularly where individuals were perceived to persist despite repeated offers of support. In this sense, enforcement operated as both a practical tool and a moral boundary: a point at which individuals were no longer treated only as vulnerable subjects in need of support, but as accountable actors against whom sanctions could be justified.

Officers' reflections align with Schaefer Morabito's (2014: 209) argument that 'there are times when arrest is in fact warranted and the police should not ignore illegal behaviour… People with vulnerabilities should not be infantilized when crimes are committed.' The result is a hybrid logic in which vulnerability and responsibility coexist: support is prioritised, but the possibility of enforcement remains essential for those deemed to have 'gone past that threshold' (S2, Brookwood) while remaining unwilling or unable to change.

Taken together, officers' accounts depict enforcement as a necessary component of their long-term responses to vulnerable people. While neighbourhood policing was consistently framed as orientated towards support, problem-solving and relationship-building, officers were clear that their role was also defined by the authority and duty to compel compliance through coercive measures where necessary. This reveals a punitive dimension to officers' accounts, where enforcement was presented not only as a route into support, but also as a way of making continued offending uncomfortable or costly. Such a stance echoes Choongh's (1997) account of policing as social discipline, where police intervention functions not only to respond to crime but also to regulate and punish certain populations through routine coercive authority.

8.3.3. Section summary

Long-term responses to vulnerable people in neighbourhood policing rested on two interconnected strands: sustained, tailored efforts to encourage engagement with support, and the calibrated use of enforcement as a last-resort mechanism to deter harmful behaviour and incentivise compliance. While support was consistently prioritised as the most appropriate and effective means of addressing underlying need, officers were clear that vulnerability did not negate their responsibility to use coercive interventions in cases of persistent and harmful behaviour. In this sense, neighbourhood policing operated at the intersection of care and coercion: officers were expected to facilitate access to support while also retaining legal powers to impose sanctions when other measures failed or proved insufficient.

Across officers' accounts, the limits of police intervention in effecting long-term change and delivering sustained support were consistently emphasised. These constraints point directly to the need for wider multi-agency systems capable of providing forms of support and intervention that police alone cannot deliver. The next section examines this in the context of partnership working in neighbourhood policing responses to vulnerable people.

8.4. Responding to vulnerable people in and through partnerships

Partnership working involves different agencies collaborating to resolve shared problems under common objectives (Davies, 2022). In the United Kingdom, collaborative working has been a statutory requirement since the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which placed a legal duty on police and local authorities to work jointly on crime reduction (Fleming, 2006; Newburn, 2008). Partnership working is especially central to neighbourhood policing, where NPTs are expected to work with local organisations to address community issues (ACPO, 2006; Singer, 2004; Quinton and Morris, 2008). As HMIC (2008: 35) stated, partnership is 'absolutely key to delivering success' in neighbourhood policing.

Although partnerships are not new, the contemporary focus on vulnerability has brought them into sharper focus. The inherently interdisciplinary nature of vulnerability, spanning domains such as policing, public health, social care, housing and education, has exposed shared concerns between sectors and highlighted the need for more coordinated, cross-sector responses (Chapter Two, 2.3.2.). This section examines how officers positioned partnership working as a core dimension of their responses to vulnerable people and explores both the opportunities it created and the challenges that complicated collaborative work in practice.

8.4.1. The role and opportunities of partnership working

Officers' awareness of the limits of their practices in vulnerability-focused work has been evident throughout the empirical chapters of this thesis. These limits included competing priorities, lack of specialist expertise, restricted capability to provide the necessary support and difficulties resolving the underlying conditions that produced vulnerability. Officers also highlighted relational barriers, noting that the police's adversarial relationship with some vulnerable people could restrict engagement and information-gathering opportunities.

Against this backdrop, officers expressed strong support for partnership working. As one constable summarised, 'partnership [working] is key to the overall delivery of satisfaction to

vulnerable people' (PC1, Ashgrove). In contrast to earlier research suggesting that police sometimes struggle to relinquish control or defer to other organisations when addressing the problems they encounter (Sampson et al., 1988; Crawford and Jones, 1995; Bullock et al., 2006), officers in this study showed a marked willingness to ensure that the most appropriate agency, often not the police, took the lead in managing vulnerability. For example:

> '…in terms of helping people and reducing their vulnerability, the other agencies… it should all be led by them really, like they should be the people helping to reduce vulnerability' (PC5, Whitechurch).

> '[I]t's not us passing on the problem, it's letting the right person pick up the problem who needs to' (S4, Whitechurch).

This is not to suggest that officers denied having a role in responding to vulnerable people. Rather, they emphasised that their contribution needed to be appropriately measured and not too expansive. For example:

> 'I still maintain that we've got the role to play with vulnerability, but I don't think we're the lead in the majority of cases' (CI1, HQ).

> 'As a police officer, as an organisation, there's only so much we can do. Silo working just doesn't work… [B]reaking down those barriers and getting everybody sat around the table… and getting that… holistic approach and that wraparound care. It… works' (S1, Whitechurch).

This reflects a shift away from police-led intervention towards a model of shared responsibility, where policing is one component within a multi-agency response to vulnerable people (Christmas and Srivastava, 2019; Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021).

Previous research finds that partnership work can be hampered by misalignments between organisations' goals, principles and professional cultures (Skinns, 2008; Rabaiotti and Harrison, 2023). Several officers in this study, however, suggested that they and their partner agencies often shared a common overarching purpose (although see 8.4.2. for alternative perspectives). As two sergeants stated, 'at the end of the day, we want the same thing' (S2, Brookwood), and '*We're all essentially gunning for the same thing and that's problem-solving*' (Ashgrove, 06/06/23). Likewise, a constable explained:

> '[I]t's a big bubble to try and figure out what the main problem is and how we can work together to get it sorted… [W]e are very similar in the sense that we are looking for the same purpose' (PC2, Brookwood).

As this comment illustrates, partnership working was seen as essential not only to resolving problems related to vulnerability, but also to understanding them. A key dimension of the vulnerability lens, outlined in Chapter Five (5.2.), involved establishing the context and circumstances surrounding individual cases in order to diagnose problems accurately and tailor appropriate responses. Officers therefore emphasised the importance of agencies pooling knowledge into an 'interwoven web' (I4, HQ) of information, rather than each organisation relying only on what it could see from its own vantage point. For example:

> '[I]t's so important that… we all pull together and get involved because then we've got better understanding as to what's going on, what could be the root cause and how we can deal with the problem' (PCSO2, Ashgrove).

> 'We have to work with our partners, with the social care, to understand their issues… We have to look beyond [the criminal perspective towards] that bigger picture to see the vulnerability' (I3, Whitechurch).

A PCSO reiterated the value of partnership working for bringing together different insights, in this case in relation to schools:

> 'Working really closely with schools I find really beneficial because they see things that we don't… and if they've got any issues from their perspective, [in terms of] safeguarding, they'll let us know and say, "Can you take a look over X, Y and Z?"… It's really good' (PCSO3, Brookwood).

These accounts reflect longstanding arguments that coordinated and meaningful partnership responses depend on effective information sharing, mutual cooperation and open communication between agencies (Rabaiotti and Harrison, 2023; Stenström, 2025). While multi-agency collaboration was viewed positively in these respects, this support was not unqualified; as Section 8.4.2. outlines, tensions sometimes surfaced where officers perceived partners as calling upon and relying on police excessively.

Information sharing between agencies was seen as especially valuable where individuals were unwilling to engage directly with police. As discussed elsewhere (Chapters Five, 5.3.1.; Seven, 7.3.; 8.1.), neighbourhood officers viewed themselves as relatively well placed to gather information on vulnerability through their local presence and engagement. However, they also recognised that some people actively avoided police contact, meaning their access to information could be partial or constrained. In such situations, partnerships became especially important: individuals were often more willing to disclose information to other agencies, which could then be shared with police. This enabled officers to access otherwise unavailable

insights indirectly, through organisations with whom vulnerable people may feel more comfortable interacting. For example:

> '[Some people] are so focused on avoiding us or making sure that they're not got any involvement with us because they hate us… that… they're more willing to talk to other agencies. And because we do exchange information, we can help each other. Likewise, with then us to them… [Y]ou get a more well-rounded approach' (PC2, Brookwood).

Another constable described how stepping back and allowing a partner agency to lead an interaction could facilitate a more effective response to a vulnerable person:

> '[If s]omebody… might not want to speak to me as a cop, I can just move back, and they've got somebody there like a support worker… or somebody from drug and alcohol services. They can jump in and speak to them… [T]here's more of a chance to get through to someone who's vulnerable [via partnership working]… There's only so much you can do on your own' (PC4, Whitechurch).

Such accounts frame information sharing through partnership work as key to overcoming the informational and relational limits of policing, enabling a more complete understanding of vulnerability and a more coordinated response.

Some officers also described partnership working as a 'two-way street' (I1, Brookwood); not only did collaboration benefit the police, but neighbourhood police work also offered valuable information to their partners. For instance, officers' sustained presence in their communities was understood as positioning them with the insights to verify, supplement or challenge knowledge held by other organisations. As an inspector described:

> '…we're the most present people on the streets, so when we've got social workers saying, "she said this and this"… we can say "well, actually, she has done this so maybe we need to go back and have a discussion"… There's information we can give that will make [partners'] jobs easier as well, so it is definitely a two-way street' (I1, Brookwood).

This indicates that neighbourhood officers' local knowledge and embeddedness within their communities contributed not only to police understandings of vulnerability-related issues, but also to wider multi-agency responses.

Beyond information sharing, officers stressed that many of the issues they encountered lay outside their capability and designated responsibility to resolve. In this context, partners were essential for bringing the powers, skills and resources needed to produce outcomes that officers

alone could not. A PCSO illustrated this through the example of neighbour disputes in council-owned properties, where the authority and powers of the police were considered to be limited in their capability to resolve the issue:

> 'We attend lots of neighbour disputes over boundary walls… Sometimes… you can't not get council involved because if they're council property, they've got more powers than what you have… so [working with the council] is invaluable…' (PCSO3, Brookwood).

The same logic was applied to engagements with the 'street cohort', where meaningful progress was understood to depend on specialist intervention from other agencies:

> '*Linking them in with rehab services is what actually sorts things out, not police intervention. So, we need our partners to do that heavy lifting, meaningful work*' (Whitechurch, 27/01/23).

Others reiterated the limits of enforcement-led approaches and the greater opportunities afforded by coordinated, multi-agency responses. For instance, an inspector described how enforcement alone was ill-suited to addressing the issues surrounding members of the 'street cohort', while a joined-up response was deemed to enable a more constructive approach conducive to long-term benefits:

> '[Taking] the enforcement route… even the courts were saying, "these people live really chaotic lives. It is just not appropriate to send them into the prison system". On the other hand, some of these people were causing real issues… so, we worked with our partners from the council to look at the harm reduction pathway… [including] criminal behaviour orders… to engage with drug and alcohol services… mental health services… It's to try and support these people… to try and address the vulnerability but also issues that cause it' (I3, Whitechurch).

These accounts reinforce a central theme in the literature: many of the problems encountered by police exceed their organisational capability and therefore require the involvement of other agencies (Rosenbaum, 2002; Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021; Stenström, 2025). However, importantly, they also show that police still retained an important role within multi-agency models. As the inspector's comment above indicates, officers' coercive powers could help secure compliance with partner-led interventions, providing a form of calibrated authority that supported, rather than substituted for, specialist work. This reflects Braithwaite's (1997) notion of 'speaking softly with big sticks', where police powers are used to encourage compliance (8.3.2.).

Observational fieldwork provided an example of police coercive capacity being relied upon by partners to enable them to carry out their own responsibilities safely and effectively. A man living in a council property had set fire to items in his garden, causing damage to the house. I was told that the council would ordinarily have attended this matter alone, but because the individual was known for being volatile and hostile towards women, the female council worker attended with a male constable equipped with a Taser. Fieldnotes captured the events that followed:

> *On arriving at the house, Jamie is tense and appears angered by Jane's presence. Following some verbal abuse from Jamie and his refusal to engage with Jane, he and the male constable, to whom Jamie is willing to speak, go into the kitchen where they appear to have a calmer conversation. While Jane takes photos of the damage in the garden, I overhear the officer tell Jamie that no action is being taken today but the council will be in touch soon. Once we are back in the police car, I ask Jane how she found the interaction. '[A] bit intense', she laughs, 'but we knew it would be. That's why we came together'. 'Did it make you feel safer having the police present?' I ask. She says, 'Absolutely. Obviously I'm not in uniform and I don't have a taser… [K]nowing it's there is reassuring… It's good for my safety'* (Ashgrove, 30/03/23).

Notwithstanding the contribution of police powers within partnerships, as exemplified above, a few officers also noted that their powers were not always effective. In some cases, police sanctions were understood to carry little weight, making the involvement of other agencies all the more important. A constable illustrated this in relation to individuals who may be indifferent to arrest or imprisonment:

> '[S]ometimes people aren't bothered about the police… They're not bothered about getting locked up… They can be bothered by other things, like losing their address… [I]f they're breaching their obligation within their tenancy agreement… that can be detrimental to their home, so partnership agencies in housing helps with that' (PC2, Brookwood).

These accounts indicate a mutual dependency within partnership working. Partners may rely on the coercive authority of police to ensure safety and support their own work, while police depend on partners' specialist powers, resources and interventions to achieve outcomes they cannot deliver alone. This reinforces the sense of collaboration as 'a two-way street' (I1, Brookwood).

Overall, officers positioned partnership working as integral to neighbourhood policing responses to vulnerable people. It extended their access to information and introduced forms of intervention beyond the capabilities of police. At the same time, police powers and local

knowledge could support the aims and activities of other agencies. Partnership working therefore functioned both as a practical means of compensating for the limits of policing and as a reciprocal arrangement through which agencies could better understand vulnerability and respond to vulnerable people.

8.4.2. The challenges of partnership working

A key difficulty in collaborative working lay in establishing and sustaining open communication with partner agencies. While information sharing was generally viewed positively (8.4.1.), officers noted that some organisations were reluctant to be seen working alongside the police. This hesitation was understood to stem largely from service users' mistrust of the police and the concern that visible collaboration could jeopardise the trust these organisations had built with the vulnerable people they sought to support. As a PCSO and chief inspector explained:

> 'Where people had a general mistrust of police…, charitable organisations, homeless organisations were reluctant to work with a uniformed police officer because of the connotations that their clients would then feel' (PCSO4, Whitechurch).

> '[B]eing in cahoots with the police, I still think there's a stigma attached to that, where you then lower your levels of trustworthiness because you might be seen as somebody who speaks to police all the time' (CI1, HQ).

This dynamic was illustrated during observational fieldwork, when two constables on patrol attempted to engage with staff from a charity providing services to sex workers in the area. Part of this charity's work involved an 'outreach van' visiting hotspot areas and offering hot drinks, food, needle exchanges, condoms, blankets and advice to sex workers. The following fieldnotes capture one occasion when the constables attempted to engage with the women receiving provisions from this charity:

> *There are many women gathered around the van, accepting provisions and speaking with the charity staff members. As the constables approach, most of the conversations cease and a number of the women appear tense at the sight of the police. The majority disperse and those who remain largely ignore the officers, despite the constables' efforts to engage by introducing themselves and asking whether they have any concerns to report. After around ten minutes of waiting by the van, one charity worker politely asks the constables to relocate. She suggests that their presence is 'making*

the women a bit uncomfortable. It's not helping. You know how it is', she says quietly (Whitechurch, 05/06/23).

This example demonstrates how negative perceptions of the police among certain vulnerable groups can prompt not only citizens to distance themselves from officers, as explored in Chapter Seven (7.3.), but also those working in partner agencies, thereby complicating officers' attempts to collaborate with other organisations.

Some officers described strategies for managing these tensions. One approach involved partners maintaining visible distance from officers while continuing to collaborate 'behind the scenes' (I1, Brookwood). This enabled agencies to preserve their legitimacy and interact with vulnerable people while still sharing information and coordinating responses with the police discreetly:

> '[W]e will have conversations with [youth workers]… in agreement with them [that] once out and about, we won't talk until they're out the way because we don't want to hinder their work, and them talking to us might then lose them some legitimacy… But then it doesn't stop conversations behind the scenes' (I1, Brookwood).

Some officers also suggested that trust and communication between agencies had improved over time. As a PCSO reflected:

> '*10, 15 years ago, we weren't allowed anywhere unless we were locking someone up. It was always [other agencies saying]: "oh no, police are here. We don't want police here". It's better now we know each other. We work together now.*' (Whitechurch, 26/06/23).

This suggests that while mistrust remained a barrier in some contexts, long-term relationship building could mitigate these difficulties. This aligns with research showing that partnership effectiveness often strengthens as interpersonal relationships develop and those working in different agencies become more familiar with one another's roles and working conditions (McCarthy and O'Neill, 2014; O'Neill and McCarthy, 2014).

A further challenge in partnership responses concerned divergences in organisational agendas. While several officers perceived broad alignment between police and other agencies (8.4.1.), others recognised that different bodies were governed by distinct objectives. For instance:

> 'Some agencies will have a different agenda than what we have… If we're working across purposes then that can be a barrier' (CI1, HQ).

An inspector highlighted the scope for police priorities to differ from those of housing organisations:

> ‘We all have different agendas… If housing perhaps have issues around a tenant that is causing them antisocial behaviour, they may want to look at perhaps moving them somewhere else where we are saying, “no, you can't move than that because that's an area of vulnerability” but all they are saying is “yes but in this location they’re causing an issue”. So… the aims are very different from within the organisations’ (I3 Whitechurch).

These reflections echo research finding that disparities in the priorities and mandates of different agencies can impede partnership working (Pearson et al., 1992; Crawford and Cunningham, 2015; Rabaiotti and Harrison, 2023).

Some officers also highlighted differences in working pace as a source of frustration and a barrier to partnership working. Policing was described as fast-moving, often at odds with what officers perceived as the slower approaches of other agencies. As a constable put it, ‘we work at a bit of a quicker pace than other agencies’ (PC5, Whitechurch). An inspector elaborated:

> ‘… we all work differently and we all work at different speeds and expect different results. I think, in the police, we're just fixers. We like things to be fixed, and we like things to be fixed yesterday… There's a lot to be said for expediency and actually just getting things done’ (I1, Brookwood).

These differences point to contrasting professional cultures and expectations, with policing prioritising immediacy and resolution while partner agencies may operate through longer-term procedures, potentially complicating joined-up working.

A final challenge concerned what officers perceived as other agencies’ over-reliance on police. This was partly attributed to the police being a 24/7 service, meaning that when other agencies were unavailable, responsibility was felt to default to officers. For example:

> ‘I think sometimes out-of-hours can be a problem. Police is 24/7… Because maybe [other agencies] are working in departments from 8 till 4 Monday to Friday, it does fall down to us sometimes out of hours’ (S3, Ashgrove).

Over-reliance was also linked to partners’ misunderstandings about the police role and the limits of police powers. Officers described situations in which other agencies assumed the police could resolve issues in ways that were not legally or practically possible. As a PCSO explained:

> ‘They sometimes come to us thinking we can do certain things and it's not necessarily the case… You can't just storm into a property willy nilly because we think there's

> drug dealing going on there, or a cannabis grow there. We need to apply for a warrant' (PCSO2, Ashgrove).

Similarly, a sergeant noted a broader tendency for non-police problems to be directed towards police, particularly in the context of cuts to other organisations' budgets:

> '…there's a lot of stuff that we struggle to deal with because it's not always a policing matter, but everyone comes to the police first… [E]specially since the budget cuts, it feels like all the reserves have pushed back onto the police… [O]ther partners push onto the police… asking us to sort stuff when it's not really our remit' (S2, Brookwood).

This reflects wider debates about the expanding scope of police responsibility under austerity, where reductions in other services have increasingly displaced demand onto policing (Chapter Two, 2.3.2.). In this sense, partnership working appeared to be marked by a paradox: while intended to distribute responsibility appropriately across agencies, pressures and constraints within non-police organisations can concentrate demand back onto the police, reinforcing the very challenges partnerships are designed to alleviate.

8.4.3. Section summary

Partnership working was widely considered indispensable within neighbourhood policing responses to vulnerable people. At the same time, officers were clear that it could also be fragile and its effectiveness was not guaranteed. While partnerships could improve police understandings and enable more productive, long-term responses, they remained shaped by various challenges. Potential difficulties such as divergent organisational agendas, differing working paces and over-reliance on police positioned collaboration not as a straightforward solution to managing vulnerability, but as an ongoing process of negotiation requiring sustained commitment and time for its potential to be realised.

In sum, partnerships operated simultaneously as a solution to, and a site of, the limits of policing. They enabled officers to work beyond their institutional constraints but also exposed the complexities of aligning multiple actors within responses to problems as contested and multifaceted as those associated with vulnerability.

8.5. Conclusion

This chapter examined how neighbourhood officers responded to vulnerable people through four interconnected forms of practice: proactive work, responses to immediate risk, longer-term engagement and partnership working. Together, these responses demonstrate both the breadth of neighbourhood policing's involvement in vulnerability-focused work and the complexity of the situations officers encountered. They also show that neighbourhood policing contributed to responses to vulnerability in distinctive ways, while remaining constrained by the inherent limits of police capability and remit.

Across these findings, a central emergent theme was the temporal variety of neighbourhood policing practice. Officers worked across different timescales: acting quickly in moments of acute risk, sustaining contact over longer periods, and undertaking slower exploratory work to understand individuals' circumstances. This temporal flexibility was not incidental, but central to neighbourhood policing's role, particularly when contrasted with the more incident-driven nature of response policing. Where operationally possible, slower practice was viewed as essential to effective problem-solving, giving officers time to build fuller understandings of people's situations, identify underlying issues and develop responses tailored to individual need.

At the same time, the chapter established that neighbourhood policing forms only one part of a wider system of responses to vulnerability. Officers saw their role as important in identifying problems, building relationships, maintaining contact and providing short-term stabilising interventions. Yet they also recognised that many individuals required specialist support that policing could not provide. Effective long-term responses were therefore understood to depend on other agencies. Although partnership working generated its own challenges, collaboration and shared responsibility were regarded as essential to sustaining more appropriate and effective responses to vulnerable people.

Overall, the chapter demonstrates that neighbourhood policing occupies a distinctive but limited position in vulnerability-focused work. Its contribution lies in its temporal flexibility, relational engagement, local knowledge and focus on early intervention and problem-solving. Yet it remains embedded within, and reliant upon, a wider multi-agency framework. Its ability to respond effectively to vulnerable people therefore rests not only on what officers can do, but also on the capacities and involvement of the broader systems around them.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore neighbourhood policing as a key site for the delivery of vulnerability-focused policing, understood here as the combination of the processes through which police interpret, identify and respond to individuals perceived to be vulnerable. Conducted in partnership with South Yorkshire Police, the thesis brought together literature based and empirical research to examine two well-established areas of scholarship – vulnerability and neighbourhood policing – and the less explored space in which they intersect. Situated in a landscape where vulnerability has become a central organising concept in policing and social policy and in which neighbourhood policing represents a leading government priority, the research offers a timely analysis of how vulnerability has been understood and operationalised by neighbourhood officers in their work.

This chapter consolidates the key findings and contributions of the thesis. It also reflects critically on the research process and considers the potential implications of the study for future work in this area.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. First, it returns to the five research questions that guided the study, addressing each in turn and discussing their most salient themes. Second, it reflects upon the research design and considers the methodological approaches adopted by the study, as well as the implications of these choices for the findings. The chapter then highlights possible directions for future research, before concluding with some final comments.

9.1. Revisiting the research questions

1. How do neighbourhood officers interpret the recent focus on vulnerability in policing and how do they situate their role in a policy landscape increasingly orientated towards vulnerability?

Vulnerability was generally not seen by neighbourhood officers as a wholly novel concern. Instead, it was often understood as a new organisational language and priority applied to long-standing, routine aspects of police practice relating to risk, welfare, social need and repeat demand. This indicates the functioning of vulnerability as a contemporary organising concept for work that policing has always undertaken, but which has become more visible, more emphasised and more tightly connected to organisational expectations. The findings therefore

suggest that the focus on vulnerability indicates both continuity and change: continuity in the types of matters officers encounter and change in how these matters are framed, prioritised and operationalised.

Officers consistently described vulnerability as a lens through which traditional police 'problems', such as crime and antisocial behaviour, could be reinterpreted as symptoms and expressions of deeper social, personal and structural conditions. Rather than treating incidents as discrete problems to be managed in isolation, this framing encouraged officers to look behind presenting behaviours and consider the circumstances that might be producing or sustaining them. Vulnerability was therefore understood and mobilised through a problem-solving framework, shifting officers' attention from surface-level incidents towards underlying causes and reframing what counted as the 'problem' at hand.

This framing had important implications for how officers perceived those involved in crime and disorder. Existing research suggests that victims are more readily recognised as vulnerable, while offenders are often excluded from such recognition (Christie, 1986; Walklate, 2011; Toman, 2019). However, officers in this study routinely adopted less rigid distinctions. Where offending was connected to trauma, poor mental health, poverty, exploitation or other adversities relating to vulnerability, such behaviour was less likely to be interpreted solely as a matter of individual choice. This did not absolutely remove officers' recognitions of personal responsibility or culpability but rather meant that conduct was understood as mediated by the wider context in which it occurred. In this way, the vulnerability lens enabled officers to make sense of certain individuals as occupying overlapping positions of victimhood and offending, challenging binary distinctions between those who require protection and those who require control. This suggests that vulnerability did not simply expand the category of people seen as requiring support; it also altered how officers interpreted a problem, individual agency and the purpose and focus of intervention.

Officers consistently positioned neighbourhood policing as central to how vulnerability is understood and how vulnerability-focused work is undertaken by the police. They associated the model with problem-solving, prevention and the capability to identify the deeper conditions generating police demand. In contrast to response policing, which was characterised wholly as focused on short-term risk management and rapid reactions to discrete incidents, neighbourhood policing was framed as more investigative and explanatory, concerned not only with what had happened but why it was happening and how it might be addressed and prevented.

This distinction was important to officers' sense of occupational purpose. Diagnosing the nature and causes of a 'problem' is central to problem-solving policing (Goldstein, 1979; 1990;

Eck and Spelman, 1987; Clarke and Eck, 2003). Officers therefore emphasised their local knowledge, ongoing contact with community members and ability to monitor situations over time as crucial to recognising vulnerable people and vulnerability-related patterns that might otherwise remain hidden. This reflects Craig and Paterson's (2015: 156) observation that officers working within specific areas develop 'a detailed understanding of a range of dynamic social problems' and how these might be addressed. This thesis adds that, within a vulnerability-orientated landscape, such situated knowledge and the related practices are central to how vulnerability is recognised, interpreted and made actionable in practice.

In sum, officers perceived vulnerability as more than a top-down policy directive. It was instead also understood as a framework that aligned with the distinctive purpose and value of neighbourhood policing. Yet, as explored under Research Questions Four and Five, this alignment was not without tension. The focus on vulnerability also expanded the expectations placed on neighbourhood officers, increasingly drawing them into complex social problems that policing cannot resolve alone.

2. How do neighbourhood officers define vulnerability?

While SYP has adopted the COP (2021) definition of vulnerability, the research found that this definition, or indeed any single fixed definition, was not applied consistently in practice. This reflects findings from previous work which has shown that vulnerability is defined differently between officers and often lacks conceptual precision (HMIC, 2015a; Keay and Kirby, 2018). Nonetheless, officers in this study did repeatedly frame vulnerability through overlapping ideas of risk, limited capacity, need and relative disadvantage. In short, the term was generally used to describe individuals or situations where harm was present or likely, coping mechanisms were constrained and additional attention, intervention or support might be required.

These findings support wider literature which argues that vulnerability is often defined through associated concepts, rather than by clear boundaries of its own (Brown et al., 2017; Gilson, 2021). However, the findings show that, for neighbourhood officers, this conceptual looseness was not simply theoretical but also had practical significance. Vulnerability operated as a flexible working category that helped officers make sense of complex and uncertain situations. Specifically, officers tended to understand vulnerability as dynamic, situational and context-dependent. Rather than framing it exclusively as a fixed attribute of particular individuals or groups, vulnerability was widely seen as produced through the interaction between individual circumstances and wider social, environmental and structural conditions. This aligns with the literature which emphasises the role of broad factors existing beyond individuals in producing

or intensifying the extent to which a person may be vulnerable (Gilson, 2014; Cole, 2016; Dehaghani, 2021). Officers also emphasised vulnerability as dynamic, shifting across time, place and circumstance. This resonates with work that challenges static or binary understandings of vulnerability and instead conceptualises it as dynamic and relational (Menichelli, 2019; Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021; Gilson, 2024).

An important takeaway from the findings is the implications of officers' flexible definitions. In one sense, they allowed officers to recognise vulnerability in complex circumstances that may not fit neatly into formal categories. This could support more contextual and responsive forms of policing. However, the absence of a stable definition meant that who was recognised as vulnerable, what kind of vulnerability was seen as relevant in policing and what response was considered appropriate were shaped through personal interpretation. This indicates how vulnerability might function less as an objective condition to be seen and understood by officers and more as a matter of practical judgement made within specific contexts. This does not mean that vulnerability is entirely invented by officers, but it does suggest that it is at least partly constructed through police practice. Ultimately, officers' own interpretations of behavioural and environmental cues enable them to decide what might count as vulnerability and what should be done about it.

In conclusion, neighbourhood officers defined vulnerability broadly, relationally and pragmatically. Their definitions reflected wider academic understandings of vulnerability as fluid, situational and socially produced, but they also revealed the operational consequences of this flexibility. The critical issue is that a broad and dynamic concept can help officers recognise hidden or complex need, but it can also raise queries as to the consistency and equitability of policing in the context of vulnerable people. These findings therefore show that vulnerability-focused policing extends beyond formal definitions to include everyday interpretive practices through which officers decide who is vulnerable, why they are vulnerable and whether their vulnerability warrants attention.

3. How do neighbourhood officers identify vulnerable people?

This research found that neighbourhood officers identified vulnerable people through a combination of official guidance, intuitive judgement and engagement with individuals presumed to be vulnerable. Importantly, identification was often an iterative process, moving between rapid initial assessments and slower, more reflective forms of analysis. A key finding is that vulnerable people were not identified through a single method or checklist but through

a shifting and cumulative use of organisational tools, professional experience and situated knowledge.

Official guidance provided officers with a framework for identifying signs of vulnerability and was intended to standardise decision-making and promote consistency. This reflects the principles of evidence-based policing which emphasise the use of authorised knowledge and structured decision-making to improve police practice (Sherman, 1998; Lum and Koper, 2017; Boulton et al., 2021). However, in this research, such guidance was not interpreted and applied uniformly by officers, with some feeling sufficiently experienced to identify vulnerable people without relying on such tools. This aligns with research showing that frontline workers often privilege craft-based knowledge over authorised directives (Gau and Gaines, 2012; Fleming and Rhodes, 2018). The findings of this research suggest that official guidance did not replace discretion; instead, the former was filtered through the latter. This matters because it shows that attempts to standardise vulnerability identification remain dependent on the judgements and actions of officers using them.

Intuition played a significant role in how officers identified vulnerable people. Officers frequently relied on rapid, experience-based assessments informed by gut instinct, visible cues and prior encounters. Using Kahneman's (2011) terms, this reflected a form of 'fast' thinking, where judgements are made quickly through pattern recognition and limited information. This could be valuable in uncertain or pressured situations, enabling officers to act quickly where potential risk or need was identified. However, intuition also carries risks. As previous work suggests, intuitive police judgement can reproduce bias, inconsistency and misrecognition (Skolnick, 1966; Ericson and Haggerty, 1997; Weisburd and Neyroud, 2011). This is especially significant in relation to vulnerability because not all forms of vulnerability are equally visible or equally aligned with officers' expectations. Indeed, as Mitchell (2020: 234) argues, recognitions of vulnerability may be shaped by wider 'cultural scripts' used by practitioners, informed by what vulnerability is assumed to look like.

Where officers recognised these limits of intuitive judgement, they emphasised the importance of engagement with individuals suspected of being vulnerable. Engagement allowed initial impressions to be further explored and then either confirmed or revised. It introduced a slower and more considered process through which officers could move beyond visible cues and first impressions towards a fuller understanding of the person, situation and context. In Kahneman's (2011) terms, engagement enabled 'slow' thinking to test and correct the outputs of rapid judgement. In this research then, engagement shifted identification away from simply spotting a fixed category of 'vulnerable person' and towards developing a more contextual understanding of the problem itself and its causes and implications.

Officers routinely saw neighbourhood policing as especially well placed to support this slower form of identification. Their local knowledge, repeated contact with residents and ability to monitor situations over time enabled them to identify patterns that may not be so apparent in single encounters. This is an important finding because it shows that vulnerability identification depends not only on recognising individual signs of need, but also on having and sustaining access to the broader past and present circumstances surrounding a person and their situation. However, this process was not straightforward. Officers' ability to identify signs of vulnerability depended partly on whether individuals were willing or able to engage with police. The institutional reputation of policing was found to sometimes act as a barrier, limiting trust and restricting officers' access to information, a point revisited under Research Question Five.

Overall, the research revealed how officers identified vulnerable people through a practical and interpretive process, not simply through formal criteria. This process could enable nuanced, context-sensitive recognition, but it also carried risks of inconsistency and bias. I would argue that vulnerability identification in neighbourhood policing is strongest when initial judgement is treated as a provisional starting point to be further tested through ongoing engagement, rather than as conclusive evidence of vulnerability in itself.

4. How do neighbourhood officers respond to vulnerable people?

This research found that neighbourhood officers responded to vulnerable people through a range of interconnected activities, framed under an overarching problem-solving orientation. These responses operated across different timescales. At some points, officers acted quickly in moments of acute risk or crisis. At others, they maintained contact over extended periods or engaged in slower exploratory work to understand what was happening and determine what form of intervention was appropriate. A key finding is therefore that responses to vulnerable people involved ongoing movements between immediate risk management and longer-term attempts to understand, support and influence people's circumstances.

Officers consistently presented slower, engagement-orientated work as the preferred response to vulnerability. They associated this with traditional 'softer' functions of neighbourhood policing, including reassurance, relationship-building, informal contact and de-escalation. These practices were seen as enabling officers to attend to the specific dynamics of a situation and respond in ways that were more tailored and generally less coercive. However, this preference was continually shaped by the realities of police work. In contexts of urgency,

uncertainty or heightened risk, faster and more reactive responses remained necessary. This reflects longstanding literature which characterises policing as unpredictable, uncertain and potentially dangerous (Skolnick, 1966; Bittner, 1980; Reiner, 2010). My findings add that vulnerability-focused policing is structured by a tension between 'slow' and 'fast' responses: officers may value approaches that emphasise time, relationships and context, but their practice remains constrained by risk, demand and the need, in some cases, for immediate action.

Across officers' accounts, vulnerability functioned as both a trigger and a justification for intervention. Most commonly, this intervention was framed in terms of care. Officers described safeguarding, support, encouragement and referral as central features of their response, particularly where individuals were willing or able to engage. These accounts align with scholarship emphasising the importance of giving vulnerable people a voice in decisions affecting them, rather than removing autonomy under assumptions that practitioners 'know better' (Spiers, 2000; Dunn et al., 2008; Brown, 2011; 2015). However, this research also found that care-orientated responses were often conditional on cooperation. Where individuals did not engage, rejected support or were perceived to pose escalating risks, officers' responses could shift towards more directive or coercive forms of intervention.

This finding revealed how vulnerability did not simply soften police responses. It could also legitimise enforcement. Officers described enforcement-led interventions as necessary in cases involving persistent problems, repeated harm or escalating risk, particularly where informal or supportive approaches were seen to have failed. Coercive action was often framed as a last resort: a way of creating consequences, deterring harmful behaviour and prompting compliance. In this sense, enforcement operated as the 'big stick' used when 'talking softly' was taken to prove ineffective (Braithwaite, 1997). This also reflects the logic of nudge theory, where the possibility of sanction encourages behavioural change without always needing to be imposed (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008; Kuyer and Gordijn, 2023). Therefore, vulnerability did not remove officers' coercive function; rather, it altered how coercion was justified. Enforcement could be presented not only as a response to wrongdoing, but as a protective intervention in the interests of the individual, the community or both.

The findings therefore indicated how neighbourhood policing could operate as a site of both care and control. Officers sought to support vulnerable people, but they also retained responsibility for managing risk, preventing harm and maintaining order. This dual role is central to the contribution of this research. It shows that vulnerability-focused policing cannot be understood only as welfare-orientated or benevolent. Even when framed through support- and care-based rationales, police responses remained shaped by coercive capacity and by judgements about risk, compliance and public protection.

At the same time, officers did not view neighbourhood policing as appropriate in all cases of vulnerability. While they saw themselves as well placed to recognise and understand vulnerability, they did not always see themselves as able to resolve it, or responsible for doing so. Some acknowledged that police involvement could exacerbate to degree to which a person was vulnerable, reflecting Dehaghani's (2017) findings. Officers therefore recognised the need for specialist expertise, resources and partnership working, aligning with a consensus across policy and academic literature (COP, 2015; 2021; NPCC, 2016; Christmas and Srivastava, 2019; Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021).

Ultimately, neighbourhood officers responded to vulnerable people through a negotiated balance of support, engagement, enforcement and referral. The focus on vulnerability strengthened the welfare-orientated dimensions of neighbourhood policing, but it also exposed the persistence of coercion and the limits and risks of policing responses to vulnerable people.

5. What challenges do neighbourhood officers encounter in their delivery of vulnerability-focused policing?

The challenges officers faced in delivering vulnerability-focused policing were not merely practical. They often exposed deeper tensions around the purpose and limits of neighbourhood policing, and of policing more broadly, in the context of managing vulnerability.

One challenge concerned officers' limited ability to address the longer-term conditions associated with vulnerability. Although this study found that neighbourhood policing is significantly orientated towards problem-solving, many of the issues officers encountered were seen to be rooted in entrenched social and structural problems extending beyond their mandate. Officers could work to identify patterns of harm, maintain contact, provide reassurance, make referrals and attempt to coordinate responses, but they could not resolve the underlying causes of, for example, poverty, poor housing, addiction, mental ill-health or social exclusion. This indicates a gap between the ambitions of vulnerability-focused policing and officers' authority, resources or expertise to genuinely address the causes of vulnerability.

This was not only a practical limitation but also an occupational tension. While officers recognised the key non-enforcement dimensions of their role, crime control was still often considered a core part of their work. In moments where officers emphasised the crime-focused aspects of their mandate, the legitimacy of their involvement in vulnerability-focused work was sometimes questioned. This aligns with existing literature showing that, even within community-orientated roles, officers often continue to view crime-fighting as central to their occupational identity (Fielding, 1995; Loftus, 2009). This research suggests that, in the eyes

of neighbourhood officers, vulnerability-focused work can sit uneasily within their remit; such work was simultaneously seen as necessary and meaningful, but not always straightforwardly 'police' work. This indicates how the focus on vulnerability can unsettle the boundaries of neighbourhood police work.

Officers also described external pressure to take on work deemed as beyond their mandate. This was often attributed to partner agencies, where officers felt that gaps in services, misunderstandings about police capacity and limited alternative provision contributed to an overreliance on policing. These findings reflect wider research suggesting that, especially in a post-austerity context, policing has increasingly been drawn into areas more appropriately managed by other dedicated welfare, health and social care services (Cummins, 2013; 2018; Buscariolli, 2025). This thesis suggests that, according to officers' experiences, partnership working can create a paradox whereby it is intended to distribute responsibility for vulnerability, but pressures within other agencies can redirect demand back onto the police. In these circumstances, partnership may not reduce police involvement but can instead contribute to the expansion of police responsibility.

A further challenge concerned the emotional labour of vulnerability-focused policing. Existing literature has long recognised policing as emotionally demanding, with consequences for officers' mental and physical health (Violanti et al., 2013; 2018; Lennie et al., 2020; Davies et al., 2023). This research found that vulnerability-focused work may intensify these pressures because officers are repeatedly exposed to complex distress while also confronting the limits of what they can do and achieve. Past research finds that this combination risks burnout, emotional fatigue and reduced personal efficacy (Schaible and Gecas, 2010; Kenworthy et al., 2014; Lennie et al., 2020). In the context of a policing landscape increasingly focused on vulnerability, greater attention must be paid, both in research and practice, to officers' welfare and how they can be supported in their work.

Neighbourhood officers also highlighted how they faced challenges in negotiating vulnerability-focused work and community expectations of the police. Past research makes clear that community policing models emphasise the importance of responding, and being seen to respond, to local concerns (Povey, 2001; Innes, 2004a; Higgins, 2018a). Officers in this study felt that residents often expected visible and immediate action, which they suggested did not always align with slower, engagement-based vulnerability work. Specifically, they raised concerns as to the scope for 'softer', less visible interventions to potentially be perceived externally by community members as ineffective, overly tolerant or insufficiently responsive.

This tension reflects broader critiques of community policing, where locally defined priorities may not correspond to the most significant problems in practice, and where 'community'

voices may reflect more vocal or influential subgroups or individuals, rather than the whole population (Myhill et al., 2003; Herbert, 2006; Crawford, 2007; Foster and Jones, 2010). The present research indicated how vulnerability-focused policing may add a further layer to this problem, namely in how officers can experience pressures to prioritise visible action on locally reported concerns, even where less visible vulnerability-related work might be more urgent, more preventative or perhaps more conducive to long-term benefits. This is reinforced by performance cultures that tend to value measurable outcomes and visible activity over slower, relational and preventative work (Fielding and Innes, 2006; Loftus, 2009; Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015). There is, therefore, reason to consider how longer-term problem-solving work might be made more legible within performance frameworks and public communication.

Officers also encountered challenges in gathering the information needed to identify and respond to vulnerable people. One such challenge stemmed from the police identity and reputation. Officers described how fear, mistrust and perceptions of over-policing, particularly among marginalised groups, could make individuals reluctant to disclose personal circumstances or accept police involvement. This reaffirms how vulnerability is not simply 'there' to be identified; it becomes knowable to officers in part through relationships and engagement that facilitate, or at least encourage, disclosure. Officers saw communication, explanation and sustained contact as ways to mitigate these barriers and build trust, and they widely viewed neighbourhood policing as well placed to support this work.

However, repeated contact with vulnerable people was also understood, in some cases, to conversely *erode* trust, especially where citizens might perceive it as discriminatory. This aligns with other work suggesting that poorly managed police contact can erode public confidence, yet positive and considered engagement-based approaches may help rebuild it (Merry et al., 2012). A key issue, officers' accounts suggested, was not simply whether or how they engaged with vulnerable people, but how that engagement was experienced by the subject of it. This finding aligns with procedural justice research showing that perceptions of police trust and legitimacy shape citizens' willingness to communicate and cooperate (Tyler, 1990; Fischer et al., 2008).

Taken together, the findings show that vulnerability-focused policing places neighbourhood officers in a difficult and at times contradictory position. It depends heavily on the local knowledge, communication and problem-solving practices that are central to neighbourhood policing, while also drawing officers into issues that may fall beyond their intended remit. In this sense, vulnerability-focused work both reinforces the distinctive value of neighbourhood policing and risks extending its role beyond sustainable or appropriate limits. Clearer guidance, better communication and stronger partnership working may help officers navigate these

tensions, but they cannot fully resolve them alone. At the centre of this tension lies the fact that vulnerability-focused policing requires officers to respond to problems that are often produced, and may be more appropriately resolved, elsewhere, while leaving unresolved the question of where the boundaries of police involvement and responsibility should lie.

9.2. Reflecting on the research design

This research adopted an exploratory case study design. It generated qualitative data through 202 hours of observational fieldwork and 22 semi-structured interviews with neighbourhood officers across three sites in South Yorkshire. The research was framed within an interpretivist paradigm, which holds that social reality is subjective and that individuals' 'truths' are constructed through their beliefs, understandings and lived experiences (Ryan, 2018: 17).

The study's design offered both advantages and drawbacks. The case study approach enabled an in-depth exploration of neighbourhood policing, while maintaining a degree of breadth by examining three sites rather than relying on a single location. Insight was further strengthened through using two data collection methods and a relatively diverse sample of officers in terms of rank, age, gender, background and occupational experience. Nonetheless, caution is necessary when considering the wider applicability of the findings. While policing scholarship has long identified recurring occupational themes that contribute to a shared 'working personality' (Skolnick, 1966), officers are not a homogenous group. As McLaughlin (2007) explains through the 'copper versus copper' dynamic, there is considerable internal variation within policing organisations. Moreover, the place-based nature of neighbourhood policing, in which NPTs are tasked with responding to the specific needs and concerns of their communities, means that findings should not be assumed to operate identically across different forces or localities.

At the same time, the contextual nature of the research does not preclude wider relevance. The officers studied operated within broader organisational, occupational and policy structures that extend beyond the individual case sites, including national developments in neighbourhood policing and the increasing institutional emphasis placed on vulnerability. It is therefore plausible that some of the practices, tensions and understandings identified in this study may also be encountered by officers working in comparable settings. The findings are thus best understood as offering analytically transferable insights rather than universally generalisable claims. Ultimately, their applicability elsewhere will depend upon the extent to which other policing environments share relevant contextual features.

More broadly, qualitative findings are necessarily shaped by the time and context in which they are produced (Hamel et al., 1993). These constraints are better understood as characteristics of situated social inquiry than simply as methodological flaws to be corrected (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The aim of this study was not to produce universally generalisable claims but to offer a detailed and contextually grounded account of neighbourhood policing at a particular moment in time, while identifying patterns and processes that may provide a useful basis for interpretation, comparison and further research in other policing contexts.

Considerations of validity also warrant attention. While the methods employed enabled rich insight into officers' perspectives and practices, the data inevitably reflect what participants chose to share. As Bryman (1984) notes, there is always scope for divergence between 'word and deed' of which researchers must remain aware. This challenge may be heightened in policing research, where officers operating within their occupational environment may be cautious about what they disclose to third parties. This reflects a well-documented wariness within policing organisations towards 'outsider' researchers (Canter, 2004; Bradley and Nixon, 2009; Buerger, 2010; Fenn et al., 2019). That said, I was fortunate not to encounter notable resistance from officers in this study. To the contrary, they generally engaged openly, with some even expressing appreciation for the opportunity to discuss, share and reflect on their work.

Examining the study's validity must also take heed of the researcher. My positionality and personal perspectives and choices shaped every stage of the research process, from what was examined to how the data were collected, interpreted and presented. While care was taken to produce ethically robust research and accurately 'get the story down' to the best of my ability (Odell, 2001: 162), the study inevitably remains a partial account. This subjectivity may be heightened by my relative proximity to the field during the data collection process. While I sought to maintain some distance to avoid 'going native' (O'Reilly, 2009: 89), a degree of closeness was necessary to gain access, build rapport with officers and be accepted within the traditionally gatekept profession of policing (Marks, 2004). The research process was therefore one of ongoing negotiation, in which I made efforts to balance reasonable immersion with reflexive awareness. This reflexivity aligns with the interpretivist foundations of the research and seeks to strengthen the transparency of the account presented.

9.3. Possible directions for future research

The methodological and practical constraints of this research and the themes that emerged during it point to several areas for future research. One key area concerns comparison. This

study adopted an overarching approach, identifying cross-cutting themes across the different case sites and officers, and thus did not take a comparative perspective. This absence indicates opportunities for further work.

For instance, there is scope to examine how vulnerability-focused policing is understood and enacted across different ranks. Existing research highlights differences between frontline officers and those in supervisory or strategic positions, often identifying tensions between policy rhetoric and the realities of police work on the ground (Skogan, 2008; Loftus, 2009; Davis, 2020). Some scholars have indicated how such distinctions may be especially pronounced within community policing models (Lurigio and Skogan, 1994; Fielding, 2009). While this study identified broadly shared views between officers on the purpose and practices of neighbourhood policing and on vulnerability-focused work, it did not systematically explore variation across ranks. Given that vulnerability-focused policing involves both top-down direction and frontline interpretation and implementation, a comparative approach would offer valuable insight into how policy is translated into practice across different ranks and departments and where disparities may arise. Specifically, research could examine if and how perspectives differ between PCSOs, constables, supervisors (in most cases, sergeants and inspectors) and senior leaders, and what any differences might mean for the consistency, implementation and overall effectiveness of vulnerability-focused policing.

Beyond rank, gender represents a further important dimension for comparative research. Policing is widely recognised as a gendered institution, traditionally characterised by cultures of masculinity that emphasise toughness, bravado and emotional restraint (Smith and Gray, 1985; Reiner, 2010; Silvestri, 2017). At the same time, vulnerability is often constructed and applied in gendered ways, informed by gender-based assumptions about dependence, risk and protection (Fawcett, 2009; Gilson, 2014; Cole, 2016). Future research could therefore explore how gendered norms and experiences shape officers' attitudes, decision-making and practices and whether these dynamics produce variation in how vulnerability is interpreted and addressed.

More broadly, there is significant scope to examine vulnerability-focused policing through an intersectional lens. Vulnerability rarely operates along a single axis; rather, it is shaped by the interaction of multiple factors, including age, race, class, sexuality and socioeconomic status (Luna, 2009; Cole, 2016; Keay and Kirby, 2018). Future research could investigate how these intersecting forms of vulnerability are recognised, navigated and responded to in policing. Such work would offer a more nuanced understanding of how vulnerability is constructed and operationalised in practice.

There is cause to explore variation between individual officers. Several scholars highlight the tendency for officers to be treated as a homogenous group, overlooking the diversity of occupational outlooks within policing organisations (Fielding, 1995; McLaughlin, 2007; McCarthy, 2013; Charman, 2017). While this study identified shared themes between officers, it also revealed differences in perspectives. By way of example, some officers framed police intervention as necessary in situations wherever there was a risk to life, while others emphasised the need for a crime-related threshold for a situation to qualify as a police responsibility (Chapter Five, 5.3.2.2.). Unfortunately, this study lacked the space to examine the potential origins of and reasons for these differences. Other research could therefore explore how factors such as age, length and type of service, race, class and personal background may shape officers' outlooks. A more systematic focus on these dimensions would provide a richer, more person-centred account of vulnerability-focused policing.

By focusing on neighbourhood officers, this study also leaves several perspectives unexplored. The views of partner agencies are notably absent. While officers provided accounts of partnership working, it remains unclear whether these perspectives are shared across the organisations with which the police collaborate. Insights into partner agencies' management of vulnerability and their experiences of collaborating with police would make worthwhile subjects of research. By bringing together different agencies' perspectives, research could help identify points of tension, misalignment and best practice, offering a basis for improving collaborative approaches.

Finally, the perspectives of citizens themselves remain unexamined in this research. Officers suggested that there have been positive developments in how vulnerability is understood and addressed within policing. However, whether these changes are reflected in the experiences of those subject to police intervention was not examined here. Future research could therefore investigate how vulnerability-focused policing is perceived on the ground, particularly by those identified as vulnerable, and how they shape trust, engagement and outcomes. Incorporating these perspectives would provide a more complete and balanced account of vulnerability-focused policing, importantly extending beyond those who deliver interventions to include those who experience their effects.

9.4. Final comments

Towards the end of the 2010s, debates about the future of neighbourhood policing emphasised whether the model could adapt to a post-austerity landscape increasingly focused upon vulnerability, risk and harm (Higgins, 2017; 2018a; Higgins and Hales, 2017). The findings of

this thesis offer a qualified response. In SYP, vulnerability was woven into the purpose and everyday work of neighbourhood policing. Core functions relating to local knowledge, engagement and problem-solving were central to how officers recognised, understood and responded to vulnerability. However, the findings also highlight unresolved questions about the boundaries of this role. While neighbourhood policing makes a distinctive contribution to vulnerability-focused work, it should not become a default mechanism for absorbing gaps in welfare, mental health, housing or wider social support. Effective neighbourhood policing depends not only on reinvestment in the model, but on a broader public service system that both supports it and respects the limits of what officers can and should do. This requires clear and sustained multi-agency capacity and distributions of responsibility, so that vulnerable people can be best supported by those with the appropriate expertise, skills and resources to meet their needs.

Almost a decade ago, Higgins and Hales (2017: 17) argued that 'if it is to be valued… and if its contribution is to be assessed and systematically improved, the next generation of neighbourhood policing will need to proceed with a definitive statement of purpose'. This thesis both supports and extends that assertion. While it finds that neighbourhood policing in SYP was anchored above all in problem-solving, the tensions identified throughout the thesis demonstrate why its mandate must be more clearly articulated, particularly as the model continues to evolve within an increasingly vulnerability-orientated policy landscape. A definitive and up-to-date statement of purpose would help protect neighbourhood policing from being overloaded with responsibilities for which it is neither designed nor resourced, while providing officers with clearer guidance and supporting greater consistency in practice.

Crucially, such a statement would allow neighbourhood policing to assert its place within the contemporary policing landscape. Historically, its contribution has often been overlooked or undervalued, sometimes cast as less urgent or impactful than response-led policing. This thesis challenges that portrayal by establishing how neighbourhood policing and neighbourhood officers make essential and distinctive contributions to vulnerability-focused work. Current policy attention and renewed government investment create opportunities for this value to be recognised, but the austerity-related developments of the last decade demonstrate how quickly such commitments can be withdrawn. A clear statement of purpose, specifying the role, responsibilities and parameters of neighbourhood policing today, would help embed its value and guard against any return to its misguided characterisation as merely 'nice to do but not essential' (Foster and Jones, 2010: 395).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview schedule

1. Can you tell me about your role within neighbourhood policing and how the idea of vulnerability informs your day-to-day work?

2. In what ways, if at all, do you perceive the current police prioritisation of vulnerability to have shaped the operation of neighbourhood policing over recent years?
    a. To what extent has the recent focus on vulnerability within policing changed the ways in which you go about your day-to-day work?

3. How do you personally interpret the word 'vulnerability' and who would you consider to be a vulnerable person?

4. Would you consider youths, members of ethnic minority communities and those who are homeless or rough sleeping to be vulnerable people?
    a. If so, how would you conceptualise the vulnerability of these different groups?

5. How would you describe the relationship between the police and these vulnerable groups, especially those with whom you frequently interact?
    a. In your experience, how do such groups and individuals typically respond to you?
    b. How might you respond to the criticism that police are quick to target or criminalise certain vulnerable groups?

6. How do you and your team identify vulnerable people?
    a. What proactive and reactive practices do you routinely employ and how do these help you identify signs of vulnerability?

7. How do you and your team respond to vulnerable people?
    a. How is an individual's need for support measured and how is the response to them triggered in neighbourhood policing practice?

8. What do you believe act as central barriers and facilitators to your team's ability to effectively support and protect vulnerable people in your area?
    a. To what extent do you feel that your team is, or is not, effectively equipped to deal with vulnerable people?
    b. What training have you received in managing vulnerability, and how helpful do you think it's been in enabling you to do your job?

9. What role do you see multi-agency collaboration as playing in managing vulnerability at the neighbourhood policing level?

10. In what ways, and to what extent, do you feel that multi-agency collaboration helps your team's ability to manage vulnerable groups and what problems, if any, does it raise or encounter?
    a. How is such collaboration facilitated between the police and third-party organisations?

11. Which element(s) of neighbourhood policing do you believe requires attention or reform for the police to engage with and manage vulnerable groups more effectively?

Appendix B: Ethics approval letter from University of Leeds Ethics Committee

Dear Rebecca Fox,

0138 - Protecting or Problematising? Exploring the management of vulnerable people in neighbourhood policing [old title]

NB: All approvals/comments are subject to compliance with current University of Leeds and UK Government advice regarding the Covid-19 pandemic.

I am pleased to inform you that the above research ethics application has been reviewed by the Business, Earth & Environment, Social Sciences (AREA FREC) Committee and on behalf of the Chair, I can confirm a favourable ethical opinion based on the documentation received at date of this email.

The committee had the following comment for your consideration:

- **We suggest that the last sentence of clause 3 in the Consent Form is deleted: "I understand that my responses will be kept confidential by the researcher" as we feel it not necessary and is slightly confusing.**

Please retain this email as evidence of approval in your study file.

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the original research as submitted and approved to date. This includes recruitment methodology; all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. Please see https://ris.leeds.ac.uk/research-ethics-and-integrity/applying-for-an-amendment/ or contact the Research Ethics Administrator for further information (EthicsEnquiries@leeds.ac.uk) if required.

Ethics approval does not infer you have the right of access to any member of staff or student or documents and the premises of the University of Leeds. Nor does it imply any right of access to the premises of any other organisation, including clinical areas. The committee takes no responsibility for you gaining access to staff, students and/or premises prior to, during or following your research activities.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as documents such as sample consent forms, risk assessments and other documents relating to the study. This should be kept in your study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited.

It is our policy to remind everyone that it is your responsibility to comply with Health and Safety, Data Protection and any other legal and/or professional guidelines there may be.

I hope the study goes well.

Best wishes

Rachel De Souza

On behalf of Dr Judith Hanks, Chair, AREA FREC

Appendix C: Participant information sheet

Participant Information Sheet

'Implementing neighbourhood policing through a lens of vulnerability: A case study of South Yorkshire Police'

Researcher: Rebecca Fox

Invitation paragraph

You are invited to take part in a research project. This document explains why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully before deciding whether you wish to participate, and please ask if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the project?

This research is being undertaken as part of a PhD project that seeks to explore how vulnerability is being operationalised in neighbourhood policing and how the recent emergence of vulnerability as a key policing priority is shaping contemporary neighbourhood policing.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen as a prospective participant due to your role working within neighbourhood policing. Understanding the thoughts and experiences of individuals in your position is central to this research.

Do I have to take part?

Participating in this research is entirely optional. You do not have to provide a reason if you choose not to participate. If you do wish to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form before participating which, along with this participant information sheet, sets out your rights as a participant. You will retain the right to withdraw from the study at a later point, but please inform the researcher of your decision to do so. You will be able to withdraw yourself and your data from the study for up to four weeks after taking part in the study but, for practicality reasons, withdrawal after this period will not be possible as the data analysis process will have begun.

What do I have to do?

The researcher will be collecting their data through two methods over a period of around six months, between January and July 2023.

For the first method, the researcher will observe the work of neighbourhood policing teams. For this process, participants will need to do nothing more than carry out the work and responsibilities that would otherwise be conducted if the research was not taking place. Whilst the researcher will endeavour not to interfere during their observations, they may ask questions where they deem it appropriate. You are free to choose whether to answer these questions.

You may also be asked to take part in an interview. These will be carried out on SYP premises and will involve the researcher asking questions about your role, thoughts and experiences as a neighbourhood officer. You may give as much detail as you wish within your answers. The interviews should last approximately an hour. **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Prospective participants should be aware that, because this study centres around vulnerability and vulnerable people, sensitive topics may be raised. However, these topics and their details will be kept relevant and reflective of situations likely to be encountered by those working in neighbourhood policing roles. You retain the right to not answer questions.

Additionally, there is no way to guarantee absolute anonymity as other participants and/or colleagues may be able to identify you through your responses, particularly in the observations in which other individuals taking part will be aware of your presence. However, please be aware that every effort to keep responses anonymous will be taken. No participant names or obviously identifying information will be included in the research or published elsewhere. If you would like to seek further reassurances of the ethical safeguards applied to the research, please contact the researcher (contact details below).

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Taking part in this study will enable you to contribute to timely research on vulnerability and neighbourhood policing, with the aim of developing insights that may help improve police practice. Participation may also result in personal satisfaction by offering a safe and neutral space to reflect on and share your experiences.

Use, dissemination and storage of research data

Participants should be aware that the interviews will be recorded to allow their content to be transcribed. The audio recordings will be used only for analysis and no one outside the project will have access to the original recordings. All data will be stored on an encrypted memory stick and, once the project is complete, identifying materials such as participant consent forms and recordings will be destroyed.

What will happen to the completed research project?

Once completed, the thesis will be submitted to the university and marked. Its findings will also be shared with SYP.

Although there are no current plans for the data collected to be used for purposes outside of this specific project, there is a chance that its findings could be drawn upon for subsequent research. For example, parts of the research may be submitted for publication during the project, or it may be used for later outputs, most likely taking the form of a report or academic peer-reviewed articles. Any research that the researcher wishes to publish, including the final thesis, will be submitted to SYP 30 days before it is submitted elsewhere, and will require the force's consent to be published. You will have the opportunity to access a copy of any such publication upon its completion.

Who is organising/funding the research?

This research is being undertaken by Rebecca Fox as part of her PhD studies at the University of Leeds. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). See their website for more information: http://www.esrc.ac.uk.

Rebecca is supervised by two Professors at the University of Leeds: Stuart Lister (S.C.Lister@leeds.ac.uk) and Adam Crawford (A.Crawford@leeds.ac.uk). The project has been approved by the University of Leeds Ethics Committee.

Contact for further information

Should you require any further information, or have any questions, about this research please contact Rebecca Fox via email: lw19rrf@leeds.ac.uk or mobile: [redacted].

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

Appendix D: Participant consent form

***Consent to take part in*:** **'Implementing neighbourhood policing through a lens of vulnerability: A case study of South Yorkshire Police'**	Please add your initials next to the statement if you agree.
I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information sheet explaining the research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. After participating, I understand that I have two weeks to withdraw myself and my data from the study. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. Should you wish to withdraw from the study during or after you have provided answers but before [date], the data you have provided will not be used.	
I understand that members of the research team may have access to my responses. I understand that my name or any obviously identifying information will not be linked with the research materials or any work that results from the research.	
I understand that the data collected from me may be stored and used in relevant future research in an anonymised form.	
I understand that the data collected during the study may be looked at by individuals from the University of Leeds or from regulatory authorities where it is relevant to my taking part in this research.	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher	Rebecca Fox
Researcher's signature	
Date	