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Trust in the Police: What is to be Done?

BEN BRADFORD AND JONATHAN JACKSON

Abstract

Trust in the police in England and Wales has diminished steadily over the past decade. Police still enjoy levels of trust that other some institutions might envy, so calling this a crisis risks over-statement. Yet, declining trust and intense media, political and social pressure on police—symbolised by a number of high-profile instances of police failure and malpractice—certainly makes many working in and around policing feel like it is a crisis. And trust has gone down; action is needed to protect the idea of policing by consent, the bedrock ideology that underpins British policing. In this article, we review some potential solutions to declining trust, while also acknowledging some costs and difficulties. We close by noting that, despite its importance, public trust is not enough to ensure 'good policing', and that more is needed in terms of transparency, accountability and governance.

Keywords: police, trust, legitimacy, reform, procedural justice

Introduction

TO CLAIM THERE IS A CRISIS of public trust in the police risks over-statement. Police retain levels of trust that might seem from some perspectives remarkably high. Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW) data from 2022/23 indicate that 52 per cent of people thought their local police do an 'excellent' or 'good' job—most of the rest gave a 'fair' rating, while 68 per cent reported they have 'overall confidence' in their local police. Yet, these indicators have declined in recent years, from highs of 63 per cent (good or excellent job) and 79 per cent (overall confidence) in 2015–2016. The 2023 Ipsos Veracity Tracker reported that 56 per cent of people stated they trusted the police, the lowest level for forty years and marking a decline of 20 percentage points since 2019. This change, closely associated with recent intense media, political and social pressure on police—symbolised most potently by the unfolding, over successive years, of the Stephen Port case, the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, the murder of Sarah Everard, the Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman case, the Casey report, and other equally high-profile instances of police failure and malpractice—means talk of a crisis may not, in fact, be hyperbolic.[1] For many of those working in and around policing, it can certainly feel that way.

Consider, for example, the issue of sexual violence against women and girls. Trust in the police has decreased among women over the past few years, especially in London.[2] In October 2020, 57 per cent of women believed that police did not treat sexual assault seriously enough; by January 2024 this increased to 67 per cent.[3] Just before Sarah Everard was murdered, at the start of March 2021, 35 per cent of women had not very much or no confidence in the ability of the police to deal with

[1] L. Casey, *Baroness Casey Review, Final Report: An Independent Review into the Standards of Behaviour and Internal Culture of the Metropolitan Police Service*, London, Metropolitan Police Service, 2023; https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/met/about-us/baroness-casey-review/update-march-2023/baroness-casey-review-march-2023a.pdf.

[2] See also S. Pickering, H. Dorussen, M. Ejnar Hansen, J. Reifler, T. Scotto, Y. Sunahara and D. Yen, 'London, you have a problem with women: trust towards the police in England', *Policing and Society*, 2024, pp. 1–16.

[3] YouGov, 'Policing of sexual assault tracker', 2024; https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/does-the-police-take-sexual-assault-seriously-enough?crossBreak=female.

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crime; by mid-January 2024, this had risen to 52 per cent.[4] This is no doubt linked to the police's poor performance in investigating crimes and supporting victim-survivors, as well as an apparent inability to root out misogyny and sexual violence within the ranks.

Clearly, the police must do better when it comes to sexual violence against women and sexism inside the service. Doing so might improve confidence. But the decline in trust over the past few years is also seen among men. Our analysis of the Mayor of London Office for Policing and Crime public attitudes survey in Figure 1 shows that levels for males and females have fallen at a strikingly similar rate, matching—unsurprisingly—the trend across the capital as a whole.[5] The belief that the police are doing a good job has fallen from 70 per cent in 2017 to 50 per cent in 2023 among males and females alike. While this masks a good deal of between-borough variation—with, for example, higher overall levels of confidence in Kensington & Chelsea compared to Hackney—a downward trend is there for all London boroughs. A similar story is found with race and ethnicity: downward trends are present for all groups, even if confidence is consistently lower overall among black, mixed and white British groups compared to Asian, other and white other groups. Perhaps even more worryingly, the past couple of years have seen a relatively sharp drop among LGBTQ+ groups, compared to non-LGBTQ+ groups.

Trust, consent and cooperation

Whether crisis is the right word for the overall trend and/or what is going on within specific social groups is, in an important sense, beside the point. Public trust in the police in England and Wales *has* decreased over the last five to eight years; something *has* changed and this change is important whether or not there is a 'crisis' *per se*. On a fundamental level, police in a liberal democracy rely on the trust and legitimacy they command, and on the cooperation, deference and compliance—the ability to police by consent—that flows from this. Policing is at the very least much more difficult in contexts and communities where trust is low.

Take, for example, the experience of some communities of the United States (US). Once consent has fallen away, the exertion of aggressive authority and palpable power is all that is left for an institution seeking to secure situational or wider compliance. This makes policing more dangerous for all concerned, more expensive and less effective. We have probably not yet reached this point in the UK, at least in any general sense—although the policing of some ethnic minorities, not just black but also Gypsy/Roma/Traveller and other groups, can certainly start to look like the US experience (minus the guns). But the widely recognised risk is that we might. If trust continues to fall at current rates, and remembering that this decline is affecting as much or more communities already low in trust and particularly exposed to aggressive, counter-productive policing, then 'hard power traps' of the kind that have snared some US police forces may become pressing dangers.[6] Even if we are not at crisis point, steps should be taken now to prevent it ever arriving.

There is also the danger of falling into 'low cooperation traps'. When people do not trust the police, they are less likely to come forward to report crimes and provide vital information to help police solve those crimes. This threatens the fair and effective functioning of the legal system in an immediate sense, but it can also create a vicious circle. When people do not feel like they can rely on the police, the police—who may already be struggling to function—cannot try to make amends and restore public support by dealing with crime. Take, for instance, victim-survivors of rape and sexual violence. They often have negative, sometimes traumatising experiences (a) when they report the crime and (b) as the crime is investigated, damaging their willingness to turn to the legal system in the future. Even if the police can improve the ways in which they treat victims and investigate crimes, they will struggle to

[4]YouGov, 'Confidence tracker', 2024; https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/how-much-confidence-brits-have-in-police-to-deal-with-crime?crossBreak=female.

[5]London Assembly, 'MOPAC trust and confidence dashboard tracker', *Greater London Authority* 2024; https://data.london.gov.uk/mopac-pcp-dashboard/increase-trust-and-confidence-dashboard/.

[6]M. Hough, *Good Policing*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2021.

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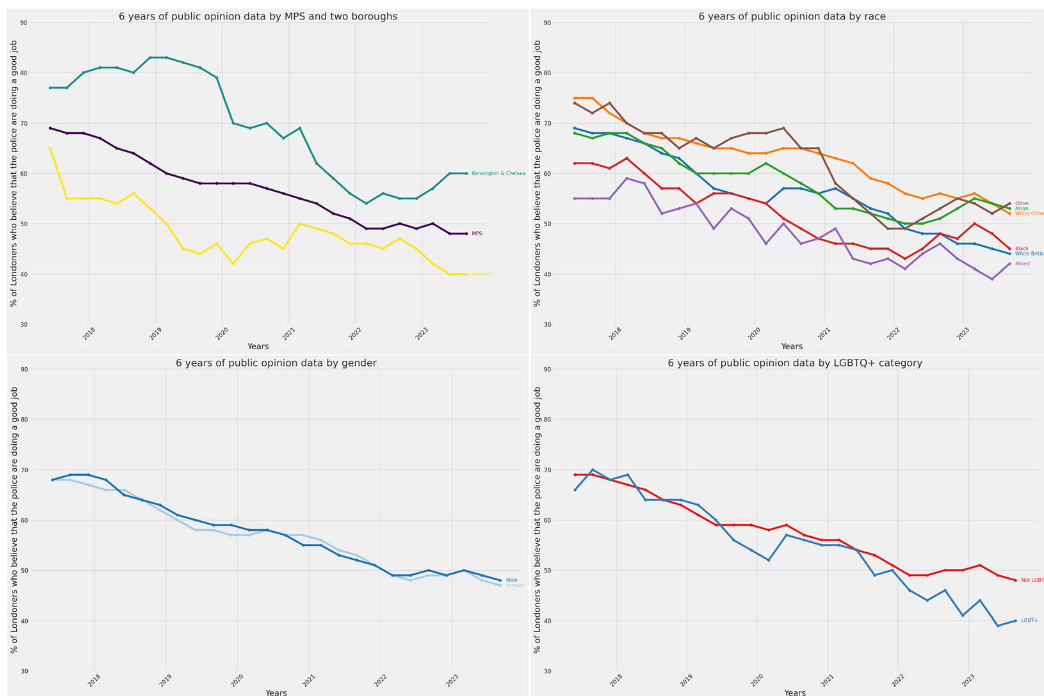

Figure 1: Trust and confidence in London has fallen consistently since 2018

win back the faith of those who will not (or will no longer) come forward in the first place.

What is to be done?

All of this raises the question of what aspects of policing are important to trust and legitimacy, and what can to be done to improve them. What can police and the penumbra of entities and actors that work in and around policing do to halt and reverse the recent decline in public trust?

We would suggest, first, not panicking. Public trust in the police declined substantially from the mid-1980s—until the early-2000s, but then increased for the decade that followed. As evidenced by the type of Crime Survey data reported above, recent declines in trust have taken us back to levels close to those of the early- to mid-2000s. On this basis, one might claim there is now a 'natural' flux in public trust in police. Whereas in the past, levels of trust were persistently and durably high, the decline in trust in many state institutions, including the police, from the 1960s onwards has arguably resulted in a 'new normal', where trust in this particular institution shifts upwards and downwards in response to short- and medium-term trends in public opinion. Calls for immediate, rapid action may thus be misplaced, risking a rush towards inappropriate or short-term solutions. Indeed, policing is particularly prone to hasty, exaggerated responses to emerging problems, which can, among other things, make appropriate identification of the issues difficult, and which inhibit a more reflective approach and a focus on sustainable long-term solutions.

That said, action is clearly needed. In recent years, efforts to increase public trust and police legitimacy have often revolved around the idea of procedural justice—that is, the quality of police activity across dimensions such as respect, dignity, voice, neutrality, accountability and openness.[7] There is a wealth of research suggesting that experiences of fair interpersonal treatment and decision making are the most

[7]T. R. Tyler, 'What is procedural justice? Criteria used by citizens to assess the fairness of legal procedures', *Law and Society Review*, vol. 22, 1998, pp. 103–135.

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important factors shaping trust and legitimacy judgements, which leads naturally to the idea that public consent can be enhanced via this mechanism.[8] If police can treat people with more procedural fairness, if they can show to the public that they make unbiased decisions, this should increase levels of trust—see the paper by Sutherland in this volume. There is good evidence that this can, in fact, be the case. A number of recent experimental studies show that enhanced procedural justice during police-public interactions increases trust, legitimacy and compliance.[9]

However, procedural justice is unlikely to be a 'silver bullet' for the current problems. Most importantly, only around one in four people have contact with police each year, and some of this will be fleeting in nature—via social media or email, for example.[10] While perceptions of procedural justice are still important for those who do not have police contact, the ability of police to have a direct effect on their views is clearly limited. More broadly, the extent to which procedural justice-based interventions can counteract or overcome some of the apparent causes of declining trust, such as revelations of police misogyny and continued failures to police minority communities appropriately, must be in some doubt.

It is also the case that other aspects of police behaviour and performance are important for trust and legitimacy. While effectiveness in 'fighting crime' often comes quite far down the list overall, it will be important for some people, in some times, in some places. Moreover, the ability of police to provide fair outcomes across aggregate social groups—distributive justice; the extent to which they operate within appropriate legal and normative boundaries—respecting the boundaries of their rightful authority; and their ability to engage with and provide protection to communities without over-policing them, or simply to avoid over-policing—all these can also be important factors in the public judgements that feed into trust and legitimacy.[11]

As or more important than these broad 'perceptions' of police are, however, the aspects and processes that precede them. What is it that police do, or fail to do, that leads people to feel they are unengaged and uninterested, procedurally or distributivity unjust, violate the limits of their rightful authority, or over-police and under-protect certain communities? A long list of behaviours and actors could follow these questions. As outlined above, the policing of violence against women and girls, including inside the service, is currently a central issue and, arguably, the biggest failure of policing over many decades. But it seems to us that there are further two issues of fundamental importance.

On the one hand, the fact that police across the UK continue to produce ethnically and racially disproportionate outcomes constitutes a key feature of current debates. While efforts such as the College of Policing/National Police Chiefs' Council Race Action Plan and the London Mayor's Action Plan are recognisant of the challenges and have triggered significant activity, the extent to which they have wrought meaningful change remains in doubt. Indeed, given the nature of the challenge, and the deep-seated socio-structural processes that underpin ethnically and racially disproportionate policing, genuine change is

[8] J. Jackson, 'Norms, normativity, and the legitimacy of justice institutions: international perspectives', *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, vol. 14, 2018, pp.145–165.

[9] L. Mazerolle, E. Antrobus, S. Bennett and T. R. Tyler, 'Shaping citizen perceptions of police legitimacy: a randomized field trial of procedural justice', *Criminology*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2013, pp. 33–63; K. Pósch, J. Jackson, B. Bradford and S. Macqueen, '"Truly free consent"? Clarifying the nature of police legitimacy using causal mediation analysis', *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, vol. 17, 2021, pp. 563–595; D. Anrango Narváez, J. E. Medina Sarmiento and C. Del-Real, 'Why do people legitimize and cooperate with the police? Results of a randomized control trial on the effects of procedural justice in Quito, Ecuador', *Crime Science*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–19.

[10] Office for National Statistics, 'Contact and trust with the police, year ending March 2016 to March 2020', 2022; https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/adhocs/15340contactandtrustwiththepoliceyearendingmarch2016tomarch2020.

[11] J. Jackson, T. McKay, L. Cheliotis, B. Bradford, A. Fine and R. Trinkner, 'Centering race in procedural justice theory: systemic racism and the under-policing and over-policing of black communities', *Law and Human Behavior*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2023, pp. 68–82.

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unlikely to be solely in the gift of police. There is, though, a continued failure to really 'get at', or perhaps just 'get', ethnic/racial disproportionality. To give perhaps the most cogent examples, police organisations continue to rely, or fall back on, policies and practices that have been shown to be disproportionate, on the basis that they are presumed to be effective in the fighting crime (stop and search), are thought to offer other kinds of benefits that allow officers to better deal with and respond to risk (the use of tasers), or can be discounted as emerging from situationally dependent and often unique circumstances (like the issue of Fixed Penalty Notices during the Covid-19 lockdowns). There is a continued reluctance in many parts of policing to accept, first, that some of the fundamental drivers of disproportionality, and thus of low trust in some minority communities, are everyday activities in the job. There seems to be an even greater reluctance to prioritise the damage to trust and legitimacy, as well as fundamental questions of fairness and doing something about them, over the operational or other benefits such activities may or may not bring. We return to this point below.

On the other hand, UK-based studies have consistently identified a link between police presence, visibility, engagement and trust, with, it seems, police numbers being an important driving factor.[12] Public desires for *the police* resonate strongly with notions of neighbourhood or community policing. People tend to see police as a part and feature of local crime- and harm-scapes, and as intimately linked to the quotidian activities that produce and reproduce social order. Police are not just 'out there' dealing with high-harm crime, terrorism and the other elements of what Jean-Paul Brodeur called 'high policing'; they are also 'right here', addressing minor crimes, disturbances and providing for social order in local communities—so-called 'low policing'. Or, at least, people think they should be.

It is useful in this regard to think about the police as what W. Richard Scott termed an 'institutionalized organization', an institution that is deeply embedded within the fabric of society. The police represent, indeed embody, activity conducted within the field and the ends to which it is directed: namely, *social control*. It is no surprise therefore, that the public over-identify *police* with *policing*, even if most of policing—the set of social processes that serve to assert and maintain social order—happens at the local level, through the informal social control processes embedded in shared norms, values and habits. This is why trust and legitimacy tend to be higher in neighbourhoods that informally police themselves, and why, where other social control processes are weak, trust in the police suffers.[13]

This is also why questions of visibility and presence loom so large in police-public relationships. The trustworthiness and legitimacy of the police are premised in part on what policing is, namely, the physical embodiment of social control activities. Presence and visibility in the community help the police reassert their symbolic role within the field of social activity they represent and operate within. In neighbourhoods where disorder is relatively high, the police can reassert their 'fit' through physical presence. This explains why the perceived and actual 'withdrawal' of police from local communities—as neighbourhood policing has withered, stations have shut, 'everyday' response and investigation faltered, and indeed, institutional focus has shifted to often hidden crimes—may have been so damaging to public trust.

Trust and police legitimacy are also bound up with larger social and economic processes, about which police may be able to do very little on their own. Where local councils and other service providers have 'failed' (literally, now, given the recent spate of council 'bankruptcies') and where the physical, economic and social conditions of local neighbourhoods appear increasingly tenuous, failures of local order are often identified as failures of the police. While there is a real debate to be had about whether police actually do dominate the general activity of policing in society—see the Crawford and Bird, et al. papers in this

[12] K. Sindall and P. Sturgis, 'Austerity policing: is visibility more important than absolute numbers in determining public confidence in the police?', *European Journal of Criminology*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2013, pp. 137–153.

[13] J. Jackson, B. Bradford, E. A. Stanko and K. Hohl, *Just Authority? Public Trust and Police Legitimacy*, Oxford, Routledge, 2013.

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volume—it certainly seems that large sections of the public conceive of policing in this way.

Do more by doing less?

Building on the above, it would seem that there are some things that police organisations could, and in many cases wish, to do to increase public trust, but which they are inhibited or even precluded from by resource constraints. Many forces may want to engage in more neighbourhood policing, increase levels of patrol, improve victim follow up, and so on. But such activities come at a cost, financially and in terms of personnel, that they may not be able to meet. Meanwhile, while the uplift programme may have returned officer numbers to something like earlier levels, pressures from other sources, ranging from the increasing complexity of crime, to the decline in other public services that have accentuated the police role as the 'service of last resort', have meant that these numbers cannot be put into areas that might have the biggest effect on trust and legitimacy. It is also the case, of course, that some of these other priorities may be more important, from a policing or wider policy perspective, than attempts to exert marginal change on public opinion. Police have, appropriately, other aims and objectives.

There might be another way to look at this issue, however. Rather unsurprisingly, police and others continue to imagine that there is an active policing response to low trust. To solve the current 'crisis', police should do more, or least do what is already being done better. For example, more neighbourhood policing, changes to recruitment, more partnership working with other services, and so on. Among other things, this would certainly tie in with the idea that the public over-identify the police with *policing*, more broadly understood. If the wider activity of policing is 'got right', then trust in the police may grow. And police clearly do need to reengage with communities, in various ways. But perhaps part of the answer lies in doing less. Consider that there are a number of currently controversial policies and practices in which police continue to engage, but are known to damage trust and legitimacy, or at least hamper wider efforts to develop positive relations with communities. Interestingly, evidence for the efficacy of many of these policies and practices is mixed, at best.

Three examples of police activities that meet these criteria are, first, stop and search. A recent systematic review of 'pedestrian stops' that considered both positive effects—on crime—and negative effects—on trust, legitimacy and other outcomes—concluded that 'evidence suggests that crime gains will result from proactive Stop Question Frisk (SQF) programmes, but that such gains are likely offset by the negative outcomes found for people who are stopped'.[14] In other words, negative effects on trust and indeed the mental and physical health of those stopped likely outweighed any positive effects on crime.

Second, there is currently a significant push for police to use facial recognition technology more frequently and with higher intensity. As with a number of other 'new technologies' in policing, live facial recognition in particular has proven to be a highly controversial development, primarily as a result of the increased levels of surveillance it heralds. Yet, evidence for its effectiveness as a policing tool is thus far notably absent. While recent deployments of live facial recognition in London have resulted in a number of arrests, it is as yet unclear whether these would have happened anyway, were proportionate to the expenditure of resource during the deployment, and did not result from concentrations of resources in particular times and places that prevented other possible outcomes elsewhere.

The third example of police policy that risks damaging trust and legitimacy is dedicated police officers in schools. The London Mayor's Action Plan has a focus on the MPS Safer Schools Officer programme, through which specialist officers are assigned to schools to provide liaison and support for the school and its pupils, but also to engage in intelligence gathering and other policing activity. This is again a controversial programme, primarily owing to the potential for ethnic/racial disproportionality in terms of the schools targeted and the students who might be affected by this 'extra' police activity—although police activity in schools risks

[14] See K. Petersen, D. Weisburd, S. Fay, E. Eggins, and L. Mazerolle, 'Police stops to reduce crime: a systematic review and meta-analysis', *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2023, p. 15.

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criminalising the behaviour of all students present. A recent systematic review of the international evidence on policing in schools concluded that schools with a dedicated police presence were no safer, and possibly even less safe, than those without such a presence.[15] To be clear, there are circumstances where police presence in schools is entirely appropriate, including to investigate crimes and work with teachers to provide education. But the Safer Schools programme goes much further than this, and introduces the potential for inappropriate police over-reach and colonisation of disciplinary systems and activities that should be the responsibility of the school.

A central feature of all three examples above is the extent to which they involve, particularly, relations between police and ethnic and other minoritised communities. Questions of race are never far away in any discussion of stop and search, LFR and the police presence in schools. Additional examples can be found in policing and policy efforts that revolve around ideas of 'crackdowns', targeted surveillance and so on, where, again, minority communities are often disproportionally affected, and which again pose significant challenges to trust and legitimacy—and, indeed, where evidence of effectiveness is again often lacking.[16] This points to a fundamental disconnect at the heart of these and other policies—they are often of questionable utility, and disproportionately involve members of communities where trust and legitimacy are already in short supply. They risk further damage, entrenching poor relationships and hard power traps. Yet, they often continue to be central elements of current and evolving policing strategies, even as senior police leaders and their political masters remain rhetorically wedded to the need to improve relationships with the publics they serve.

The question of why this is the case is beyond the scope of the current essay—although it seems safe to say that a range of complex cultural, organisational, institutional, and social processes come together to produce the forms of myopia the examples above suggest. But it does not feel like too much of a stretch to suggest that if police spent less time on the kinds of activities outlined above, they would have more time to concentrate on the 'basics' that people from many different communities appear to value—visibility and presence, including in communities other than those particularly beset by crime, rapid response to emergencies and other calls for service, effective, fair and timely crime investigation, and working with non-police partners to generate durable solutions to local problems. If resources are indeed so tight, perhaps there are ways of spending them which hold less risk for already fragile levels of trust and legitimacy?

Conclusion

There are some important caveats to the discussion above. While it is fairly clear that improvements in public trust are most likely to be garnered from policing styles that can be glossed as neighbourhood or community policing, visibility, presence, and rapid, effective, response to low level—or volume—crime, this does not automatically imply that this is where police should focus their resources. It would be dangerous, not to say absurd, to argue for a re-focussing of effort away from high harm, low visibility crimes like sexual violence or modern-day slavery because this would free up resources for activity more likely to boost trust. Public opinion, even in discussions of trust and legitimacy, cannot be the sole arbiter of success in policing, nor be the only criteria for resource allocation. The question is how to get the balance right. And of course, even in high harm scenarios, there is a need to address fundamental questions of procedural and substantive justice, which has too often not, alas, been the case.

It would seem then that there is a need for police and other interested parties to think more clearly and deeply about the harms to trust, legitimacy and a wide range of other outcomes that everyday police activity can perpetrate, particularly in relation to those minoritised and marginalised communities that often experience most policing. This is

[15] B. W. Fisher, A. Petrosino, H. Sutherland, S. Guckenburg, T. Fronius, I. Benitez and K. Earl, 'School-based law enforcement strategies to reduce crime, increase perceptions of safety, and improve learning outcomes in primary and secondary schools: a systematic review', *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2023.

[16] A. Braga, B. Welsh and C. Schnell, 'Disorder policing to reduce crime: a systematic review', *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2019.

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not to argue that police should never behave in ways that might, in the short-run, damage trust, as for example, when rapid decisions need to be made without the time to explain them to all those affected. Such instances are fundamental to the nature of police work. But it is to argue that at various levels of tactics, strategy and policy, the service remains too closely wedded to a range of behaviours that, while entirely legal and often situationally justifiable, damage the relationship between police and public that all concerned claim is central to their vision of policing.

Yet, because trust and police legitimacy are bound up with the wider set of processes that reproduce, or undermine, social order, it is not enough to think simply about what police can 'do' to rebuild trust. The relationship between police and public is also shaped by the activities of other actors. This is not to say that other institutions and agencies should be tasked with helping police in this matter, but rather that in order to repair something, one needs to understand how it works. Or, to put it another way, if we are to address the questions of trust and legitimacy that currently face policing, it seems likely that these need to be considered within a wider understanding of the issues currently facing individuals and groups who are dealing with the attenuation of other services and challenges to their ability to live well, or at least bearably, in their neighbourhoods and communities.

Refocussing on the police, we close by noting that lower trust in police might actually be a good thing. The 1962 Royal Commission on Policing conducted a public survey that identified what by modern standards were extraordinarily high levels of trust among the public. Yet, it is well evidenced that policing at the time was racist and misogynistic—even by contemporary standards—and remarkably corrupt, not to mention ineffective and barely subject to external oversight. Trust enables the trustee to act as they see fit, and unwarranted or misplaced trust can dampen the trustor's propensity to identify fault and misbehaviour. It is plausible to argue that right up to the present day, excessive public trust has allowed systemic racism, sexism, misogyny and homophobia—not to mention multiple scandals and failed investigations—to, if not exactly flourish, then at least continue without adequate checks and interventions. It is naïve to assume bad actors won't be attracted to police power, that policing can somehow be 'done' exactly right, and to rely too much on public trust and too little on mechanisms of transparency, accountability and robust governance. Now that trust can no longer be taken for granted, but must be continuously re-earned, we need to think harder about how to do so, and about how to put robust mechanisms inside as well as around the service that, for example, open it up to further external oversight and enable genuine community input into its priorities, processes and practices.

Ben Bradford is Professor of Global City Policing and Director of the Centre for Global City Policing in the Department of Security and Crime Science, University College London. He is an Affiliated Scholar in the Justice Collaboratory of Yale Law School. *Jonathan Jackson* is Professor of Methodology at the London School of Economics & Political Science. He is an Honorary Professor of Criminology at the University of Sydney Law School and an Affiliated Scholar in the Justice Collaboratory of Yale Law School.

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