

Commentary

Introduction: Policing the Permacrisis

Abstract

Against the backdrop of what seems like a perpetual cycle of crisis for policing in modern day England and Wales, this introduction synthesises some of the core challenges facing the police. A catalogue of crimes committed by serving officers, missed opportunities for reform, and a scathing review of the internal culture of the Metropolitan Police culminating in a recommendation for a ‘complete overhaul’, might initially leave some readers with the view that there is little hope for fixing an outdated and buckling police service. Yet this collection of articles, authored by academic experts, senior police—both current and former—and commentators, not only summarises some of the problems facing policing as the new Government beds in. The contributions also brim with a diverse set of ideas for changing policing for the better and rebuilding trust and confidence. We conclude with the idea that a fundamental review and reconceptualization of the police role, of the type that might be provided by a Royal Commission, is needed if we are to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Keywords: policing, leadership, culture, misogyny, racism

Introduction

POLICING IS AN INHERENTLY difficult task. Among an extensive list of activities and powers, it involves highly consequential decision making in contexts of low information, adjudicating between incommensurate yet equally justifiable claims, dealing with people at moments of life-changing stress, injury or harm, and navigating a complex and ever-changing set of social, political and economic debates, processes and outcomes. Policing primarily occurs when something has gone wrong—or has at least *seemingly* gone wrong. The mere presence of officers in a particular time and place can thus signal failure, some of which inevitably attaches to the organisation itself. And the presence of police in some locations and not others, the tactics at their disposal, and the solutions they can offer, all tend to recreate and reinforce existing inequalities and social hierarchies.

Policing is consequently almost always controversial. Errors, accidents and wrongdoing, or even just the appearance of such, can be very visible and have far-reaching consequences for individuals, communities

and the state. Even when there is no failure or fault, the mediating role that police play in a multitude of relationships—most notably that between the citizen and the state—means that those involved in a diverse set of contests and conflicts can feel that the institution has let them down, and even betrayed them. Officers are also often caught up within, or are players in, socio-political tension and struggle, with all the implications this can bring when one side ‘wins’ or ‘loses’.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the relationship between police and policed, and the position of police within the nation and the state, is always in flux. Yet, while contest and controversy around policing is almost inevitable, the present ‘moment’ in British policing seems to go beyond this. A diverse set of events, situations and longer-term processes have come together to produce what looks, from some vantage points, to be a legitimacy crisis. The status, power and very role of police has been brought into question.

The nature of this crisis was crystallised by Dame Louise Casey’s report into the work and culture of the Metropolitan Police Service

(MPS).¹ In the aftermath of the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer, and a number of other high-profile serious crimes committed by serving officers, the Casey review delivered a swingeing critique of the internal culture of the MPS, highlighting sexism, misogyny, racism and homophobia within the force alongside a range of other problems. Delivering yet another severe blow to the public's confidence in the police, during Casey's review, David Carrick was convicted as one of England's most prolific sex offenders. He pleaded guilty to multiple counts of rape and serious sexual assault over the course of seventeen years, during which time he was a serving firearms officer in the Metropolitan Police. It is not surprising that Louise Casey concluded that the MPS requires a 'complete overhaul' if it is to restore public trust and confidence.

However, the problems currently facing police extend far beyond London and the nature of police culture. Not only have other forces experienced similar scandals and disgrace, even if these received less attention at the national level, but a wider set of structural issues, including the aftermath of cuts to police budgets from 2010 onwards, the changing nature of crime, processes of social and cultural change, and a febrile political context, are affecting all police organisations across the country. The nature of these challenges, coupled with the problems *inside* many forces, has produced not just a legitimacy crisis, but a 'permacrisis'—an ongoing, rolling sense of dislocation that fits well David Shariatmadari's definition of that word: a 'dizzying sense of lurching from one unprecedented event to another, as we wonder bleakly what new horrors might be around the corner.'²

In this volume we bring together fifteen articles that address some of the diverse challenges facing British policing as the new

Government beds in.³ When thinking through some of the ways out of the permacrisis, many authors concentrate on what might be termed 'smarter policing'—doing things differently and proceeding in a genuinely evidence-based fashion, but also not assuming that current and long-standing problems can necessarily be solved by simply doing more, albeit better, policing. In the context of the recent general election, and the hope for greater political will and acumen, they argue that it is important to do less, better.

While a fair proportion of the contributors are university-based academics, part of the working day for many involves engaging with think-tanks, government bodies, or the police. Several work in advisory roles or sit on steering committees and task and finish groups within policing and/or government. The authors who work outside traditional university settings are variously connected to the College of Policing, the Police Foundation, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) or the civil society group Stop-Watch. Neil Basu is a retired Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and was head of counter terrorism policing and Met Assistant Commissioner of specialist operations. James Taylor is Detective Chief Superintendent and the Head of Opal, the national intelligence unit focussed on serious organised acquisitive crime (SOAC) responsible to the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). Betsy Stanko worked for a decade inside the Mayor of London's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and the London Metropolitan Police Service's Corporate Development, and along with Katrin Hohl, has been central to Operation Soteria Bluestone, a national Home Office funded research and change programme led by the NPCC. Katrin Hohl is also the Independent Advisor to the Government Rape Review.

Several of the diverse voices collected for this volume are concerned with clarifying the role of police and thinking through a 'less is more' approach. Crawford, Muir and Bird, et al. start with the foundational question: 'what is policing for?' They outline how calls to 'defund the police', and the increasing demand for police to handle mental health,

³As is often the case in such efforts, the arguably unique case of Northern Ireland is largely absent, although we imagine that many of the issues discussed here apply there, too.

¹L. 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>

²D. Shariatmadari, *Don't Believe a Word: From Myths to Misunderstandings—How Language Really Works*, London, Orion Publishing, 2020.

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social work and emergency response issues, highlight the need for a critical assessment of the problems that the police are expected to solve, and the sharing of the burden with other public services. Societal and technological changes pose new challenges to policing, they argue, and if policing is a plural enterprise involving various actors, such as private service providers and social media platforms, we need to challenge the myth that police are the sole guardians against crime. We need also to recognise the interdependence of welfare and policing, as well as the discretionary powers of other professional agencies in governing populations.

Crawford argues for a broader, multilateral approach to public safety that involves diverse organisations and acknowledges a more nuanced understanding of the police's role beyond law enforcement and maintaining order. A fundamental shift would involve comprehensive reforms and resource reallocation to simultaneously strengthen *and* narrow the focus of policing to address modern challenges. Both Crawford and Bird, et al. use the 'Right Care, Right Person' (RCRP) operational model—which aims to ensure that vulnerable people get the right care from the right emergency service, and limit police involvement in mental health-related incidents—as an example of how to limit police involvement in situations better handled by other public services. Bird, et al. link RCRP to the broader discourse of 'defund the police'. Merely withdrawing police from providing an emergency response to mental health crises is insufficient, they argue. What is needed is careful consideration and measures that genuinely move away from carceral responses to social problems. They explore the potential for transformative alternatives in mental health care.

While our goal in this introduction is to pick out important themes across the fifteen papers, we should also note that there are some divergent voices. For instance, Bird, et al. argue that 'RCRP risks letting the police off the hook while putting people at risk.' Recognising that RCRP is 'by no means an intentional step by the police or state actors towards defunding the force', they suggest some more transformational ways to do defunding properly. They call for a row-back from the 'carceral state', like abolishing Section 60 stop-and-search powers that give police the right to search

people without reasonable grounds, undoing the accelerating rollout of facial recognition technology (earlier this year, the former Policing Minister had challenged the police to double the number of searches they make using retrospective facial recognition technology)⁴, and a shift to more 'holistic approaches to harm prevention' that focus on 'non-punitive visions of care.' Crawford argues, however, that 'non-punitive visions of care' may be difficult to realise in theory and in practice. He offers a cautionary note against treating 'welfare and policing'—care and control—as if they were conceptually and organisationally distinct, rather than permeable, intertwined and interdependent.' A wide range of social institutions—including social workers, doctors, housing providers and educators—directly and indirectly regulate behaviour, he says: 'Populations are governed not only by interactions with discrete agencies but rather in and through assemblages of complex and hybrid processes, mentalities and organisations.'

Examining the social and technological changes that challenge the police, such as the rise of cybercrime and the necessity for international cooperation, Muir argues that policing should shift towards a multi-agency prevention approach. To achieve this, we must address skill gaps, improve equipment and provide national leadership. He also advocates for stronger collaboration across public services and municipal leaders, focussing on preventative outcomes and dedicated crime prevention efforts. He differentiates between a people-centred approach, which targets early intervention and addresses risk factors in young people, and a location-focussed approach, which aims to reduce opportunities for crime, particularly online.

Several papers address the issue of police culture. Basu, Charman, Feilzer and Loftus, Wire and Flanagan, and Sutherland argue that police organisations foster internal cultures that can exhibit a 'them vs. us' mentality, that can lack care and support, tolerate misconduct, and fail to take complaints seriously. Basu examines issues such as bullying, authoritarianism, desensitisation to trauma and team

⁴Police urged to double AI-enabled facial recognition searches, Gov.UK, 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/police-urged-to-double-ai-enabled-facial-recognition-searches>

dynamics that perpetuate poor behaviour, discourage whistleblowing and generate poor attitudes towards the public. Charman identifies some enduring structural and cultural challenges that make police culture exclusionary for women. She highlights three key factors affecting women's advancement and success: access to time; a toxic culture of 'extreme work' and perpetual availability; access to formal flexible working arrangements; and access to informal social networks that facilitate progress. Feilzer and Loftus point out core characteristics of police culture, including an exaggerated sense of mission, celebration of masculine exploits, cynicism and a defensive solidarity among colleagues. They argue that this culture creates resistance to reform, inequitable service provision, and is at the heart of recent scandals and reports of institutional racism, sexism and homophobia within policing. They also discuss elite units, which often exhibit hypermasculinity and exclude women and officers of colour. Wire and Flanagan describe how the fear of negative repercussions for speaking up; the impact of fear, embarrassment and guilt; the dual nature of solidarity as both a strength and an obstacle; and the role of poor leadership comprise the cultural foundations of sexism and misogyny within policing. Finally, Sutherland discusses barriers to achieving diversity in policing and the need for cultural change to address misconduct and the mishandling of complaints.

Several contributions focus on the need for better leadership to change culture, increase diversity throughout the ranks, and drive better practice. Basu calls for a move away from current and deeply embedded 'command and control' styles of police leadership, and emphasises the need for compassionate and effective leadership and better training for leaders. Charman argues that stronger leadership is essential to address the challenges and barriers to women's progression within the police. This can be achieved with a strategic focus on retention, fairness, compassion and a shift away from the traditional command-and-control structure. Feilzer and Loftus stress the need for new leadership models that involve bottom-up approaches, incorporating the insights of rank-and-file officers and diversifying the composition of police workforces. Muir recommends establishing a national police headquarters to push through improvement, provide organisational support

for specialised areas of operational policing, and enhance technological infrastructure. Bowers and Johnson continue the discussion on technology, calling for proactive engagement in foresight activities at the national level. Stanko and Hohl describe how Operation Soteria Blue-stone aims to address the failings in rape investigations within the police service. They outline the National Operating Model for Rape and Serious Sexual Offences, emphasising the importance of leadership-driven change. Wire and Flanagan also stress the role of top-level leadership in tackling sexism and misogyny within the police force.

A number of papers pick up the theme of misogyny in the ranks—Wire and Flanagan, Charman, Feilzer and Loftus, Bradford and Jackson, and Stanko and Hohl. Wire and Flanagan describe the pervasive issue of sexism and misogyny within British policing, highlighting high-profile cases and reports that have exposed such behaviour in the MPS and other forces. They outline a behavioural science approach adopted by the College of Policing, which offers a deep understanding of the problem, including the gendered division of labour, sexual harassment and ostracism of those challenging such behaviour. Charman discusses the Met's efforts to promote gender equality and flexible working arrangements to create a more inclusive workplace. She highlights ongoing structural and cultural obstacles that prevent the full integration of women into the police force. Feilzer and Loftus argue that recent high-profile scandals have exposed deep systemic failings, raised significant questions about police power, reputation and public trust, and highlighted the tendency of police organisations to blame individual officers rather than addressing organisational culture, internal processes, and hierarchical structures. They illustrate this with examples of hypermasculinity and the exclusion of women and people of colour from elite units. Stanko and Hohl document an ongoing and unresolved crisis in the policing of sexual offenses against women and girls. They identify failures to incorporate specialist knowledge about rape and sexual offending, a lack of understanding of repeat sexual offenders and the human toll on investigators owing to high caseloads and stress. They also highlight poor data analysis capabilities, the need for improved digital forensics, and the corporate, institutional

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nature of these failings. Bradford and Jackson examine the decline in trust in the police among women in London. They frame the lack of trust against poor performance in investigating sexual violence, supporting victims, and the apparent inability to root out misogyny and sexual violence within the ranks.

Racism and disproportionality are tackled by Shiner, et al., Quinton, and Basu. Shiner et al. provides a historical context for the use of stop-and-search (S&S) in England and Wales, discussing how these powers triggered resentment during events like the 1981 Brixton riots. Quinton expands on the theme of disproportionality, outlining what the data reveals about relative rates of S&S and the consequences of negative police encounters. He discusses various ways to measure racial disparities and advocates for a social-ecological model to understand ethnic disproportionality. Basu explores how institutional racism affects recruitment, promotion, retention and discipline within the police. He examines the impact of the Macpherson Report and the post-9/11 War on Terror on race relations.

Turning to the crime specific challenges facing police, Bower and Johnson argue that rapid technological change brings both benefits and criminal threats, but that regulation is lagging behind these advances and anticipatory legislation is rare. They discuss the potential of generative AI (Gen-AI) and quantum computing, noting that the UK lacks coordination and leadership in adopting new technologies. New technologies can not only create new crime threats, but also offer new tools to fight crime. Focussing on Gen-AI and quantum computing, Bowers and Johnson note the lack of systematic evidence on the benefits of technology in policing, and stress the need for comprehensive assessments and evidence-based recommendations. They advocate for a systematic approach to evaluating the potential utility of emerging technologies in policing and the development of a framework to organise thinking and evidence along certain key dimensions. They highlight the EMMIE (effect, mechanism, moderator, implementation and economics) framework used by the College of Policing to summarise crime reduction strategies, and the CRIMEFACE (context, reach, implementation, mechanism, economics, findings, adaptation, cost and evaluation) framework to guide the ethical and evidence-based use of emerging

police technologies. They also emphasise the importance of systematic research, ethical reviews and economic analysis before implementing new technologies in policing.

Taylor, Taylor and Unsworth consider the complexities and issues that are brought to the fore by the policing of high-volume acquisitive crime. Drawing upon the example of retail crime and the recent ‘epidemic’ of shoplifting widely covered in the media, they argue that chronic under-reporting creates a blind spot for policing that directly impacts on public confidence and trust. In a review of police recorded crime rates in comparison to industry surveys, they suggest that as little as 3 per cent of incidents are currently being reported to and recorded by the police. Yet, a significant increase in reporting would not only be politically challenging, but it would also present substantial resource issues for the police. They argue that the answer lies in the creation of a national retail crime intelligence bureau, like the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau established in 2010 in response to the overwhelming increase in fraud at that time, which would provide increased visibility for trends in activity, particularly in relation to organised and prolific criminals, without overwhelming already stretched police resources.

Focussing on the need for smarter use of research and data, Sutherland points out the irony that while policing is supposed to be evidence-based, law enforcement agencies often don’t use data, statistics and research to guide their own practices and policies. He explores how evidence can help address issues identified in the Casey Review, such as trust and confidence, recruitment, diversity, bias, misconduct, complaints and cultural change within policing. Evidence, behavioural science and testing should play a larger role in policing, in these examples and elsewhere, and Sutherland considers some of the barriers to use. Wire and Flanagan explain how the College of Policing is working to develop evidence-based interventions for policing, integrating effective behaviour change techniques, and ensuring relevance and feasibility. They describe the use of a specific behavioural science tool—the behavioural change wheel—to interventions in order to address the challenges of tackling workplace sexism in policing.

Quinton is also concerned with how data are used in policing. He reviews the evidence for significant and complex disparities in stop and search (S&S) practices. He discusses the limitations of using relative search rates to understand the relationship between race and S&S. He documents several potential outcomes of poorly conducted S&S practices and considers key issues regarding data and the use of different denominators when (a) establishing the extent of the problem and (b) explaining the social-ecological factors driving disproportionality.

Bradford and Jackson review the empirical evidence on declining levels of trust in the police. They highlight how trust in the police has been falling across all social groups in London, not just among women and ethnic minorities. They explain that loss of trust can create ‘hard power traps’ and ‘low cooperation traps’, where decreased public cooperation makes policing more difficult. They argue for long-term strategies rather than quick fixes, with a sustained focus on improving procedural justice, increasing police visibility and enhancing community engagement. Shiner, et al. highlight how stop and search (S&S) powers can harm community relations and decrease trust, especially in racialised communities. They argue that a reduction in the use of S&S, the effectiveness of which is not well supported by the evidence base, will help address the feelings of under- and over-policing in some communities. Bradford and Jackson also support the need to do less, but doing it smarter, noting that a number of current police interventions are known to damage police-community relations, or at least to create tension, yet lack evidence that supports their effectiveness in stated crime-fighting goals. Finally, Kyprianides and Taylor discuss the enduring impact of police violence and discrimination on communities, emphasising the need to address collective, community and intergenerational trauma. They argue that the police need to acknowledge past wrongs and engage in reconciliation strategies to prevent unresolved tensions from flaring up. They introduce the Trauma-Informed Community Building and Engagement model to support this approach.

In conclusion

Many of the issues of current concern—racism, sexism, organisational culture, poor leadership, the challenge of new crime types, and

so forth—have pedigrees that go back years, decades, and in some cases span the entire history of modern-day policing. Perhaps this is why the word *permacrisis* seems so apposite. These are all, in a sense, well known problems, even if each new instance can appear unprecedented. However, they recur with alarming regularity, and those working in and around policing await their next manifestation with some trepidation.

The articles we have summarised above, and which you can read in this carefully curated special issue, coalesce around a set of core ideas that paint a picture of a police service under significant pressure and, indeed, in a state of almost permanent crisis. But they are not without hope; indeed, they brim with a diverse set of ideas for changing policing for the better. Doing ‘smarter policing’ seems to mean re-thinking the role of the police, possibly fundamentally, using data and evidence in ways far better than has often been the case in the past—and, equally, in ways that do not assume answers to police problems are always to be found within the police—taking seriously the contribution of other actors and agencies to interlinked processes of care and social control, fostering a step-change in diversity within the organisation, and placing centre-stage the relationship between police and all the communities they serve. How likely it is that all this will transpire is, at this stage, very possibly moot. Yet, it seems imperative that such efforts are made, else the police risk getting ever further stuck in a recursive circle of crisis, reaction and further crisis.

As the new Labour government finds its feet after a monumental shift in political fortunes, the travails of policing will be one issue among many facing the new ministers responsible. Even considering simply the rest of the criminal justice system, the courts, prisons and probation all demand as much if not more attention, given the condition of the services they offer and, indeed, the physical spaces they occupy. But the centrality of policing to the way people think about problems of crime and disorder, the role police play in mediating between state and citizen, and the extent of the harm that can be caused when policing goes wrong seem likely to mean this is an area they will return to time and time again. Like others in this volume, we suspect that a fundamental review and reconceptualization of the police role, of the

type that might be provided by a Royal Commission, is needed if we are to hope to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

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