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Feilzer, Martina; Loftus, Bethan

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# Scrutiny of Police Institutions and the Spectre of Culture

MARTINA FEILZER AND BETHAN LOFTUS

## Abstract

This article revisits the concept of police culture and its explanatory value in understanding the recent scandals that have rocked policing in England and Wales. It focusses on concerns around the prevalence of sexism and violence against women and girls (VAWG) within policing and explores whether an increase in the diversity of police officers has pushed aspects of police culture into specific specialist and less visible areas of policing. The article suggests that any attempts at substantive police reform need to consider radical organisational and structural change, including a new narrative for British policing. Such a narrative needs political and social support and will require wider engagement beyond internally focussed police discussions.

**Keywords:** police culture, organisational and structural reform, VAWG

## Introduction

BRITISH POLICING IS EMBROILED in a relentless cycle of institutional crises. In the last several years alone, a stream of national scandals has exposed serious criminal offences committed by serving police officers from across numerous forces, including police-perpetuated violence against women and girls (VAWG). British policing and, with it, the legitimacy of the state, is now imprisoned within an ‘extended present’ of public controversy for which yet another round of urgent reforms has been proposed.<sup>1</sup> Most of the reforms have centred on solutions to preventing individual wrongdoing—for example, improved vetting prior to recruitment or continuous vetting through police officers’ careers. Other reforms suggest improving police leadership. Few reform proposals—if any—grapple with the question of whether fundamental shifts and structural changes in the rationale and operation of police institutions are required, nor how these could be implemented. At the heart of many of the recent scandals is the enduring spectre of police culture, indicating that despite the appearance of progress and decades of reform initiatives and a partial

diversification of the workforce, several subversive and damaging features of police values and behaviour survive.

Many readers will be aware of recent high-profile scandals that have sent shockwaves through British society. The article acknowledges, in particular: the abhorrent Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) response to the murder of two sisters, Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman; the kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard by Wayne Couzens, a serving MPS officer; the conviction of serial rapist and violent abuser, David Carrick, who was also a serving MPS officer; and revelations that undercover officers have deceived women—some of whom they were monitoring—into sexual relationships, as well as other morally problematic behaviours.

At the time of writing, the national media continue to report—almost daily—cases of police violence, malpractice and corruption. These incidents not only identify deep systemic failings in the way police wrongdoing is investigated and disciplined, but they also raise uncomfortable questions about police power, reputation and trust in public life. Despite growing consensus that police misconduct should be understood as a case of rotten orchards, and not just rotten apples, the government and police leaders remain slow to adapt to this shifting perspective and instead insist on improved and more regular vetting to prevent unsuitable individuals

<sup>1</sup>H. Nowotny, *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994, pp. 1–192.

entering policing and rooting out rogue, deviant officers. However, the current crisis within policing—particularly police-perpetrated VAWG—has radically unsettled trust in the police and its organisational integrity. There is reason to believe that extreme expressions of police culture—sexual violence, misogyny and the code of silence—have moved into the shadows of, and thrive within, specialist units. Such units, particularly those oriented around hypermasculine activities such as the use of firearms and personal protection, appear to share key features that nurture and accommodate the toxic culture that is coming to light, and reveal much about the vanity of a perceived organisational elite—including, the othering of the public, the hollow appreciation for human rights and an overarching sense of immunity from any reprisal.<sup>2</sup> These units are dominated by male officers, with limited turnover, operate in conditions of low visibility, and are less conducive to effective critical oversight and governance.

Whilst there are underlying similarities linking recent scandals, police organisations continue to place the blame firmly at the door of individual officers, faulty processes or failures of leadership. It is this predictable pattern of responding to scandals by increasing scrutiny on individual officers that means discussions of what organisational and structural elements allow specific individual behaviours to thrive is neglected. It also has the adverse effect of increasing the blame culture within policing by creating defensiveness at the individual and organisational level, undermining the ability to develop policing as a learning organisation. It is now time, therefore, to review carefully the organisational culture, alongside internal processes and hierarchical structures—from recruitment messaging and the enrolment of new officers to the main initial training of officers which, despite the introduction of the Policing Education Qualification Framework (PEQF), has

<sup>2</sup>It should be acknowledged that, in recent years, many UK police forces have introduced new units that focus on ensuring the safety of individuals who are at risk of becoming victims of specific crimes, including VAWG. Such Protecting Vulnerable People Units (PVPUs) are oriented towards safeguarding and protecting vulnerable people and, in so doing, depart from the traditional paramilitary, crime-fighting approaches of firearms—and other similar—units.

remained largely in the hands of police trainers. Do we fully grasp the narratives that permeate police organisations, the organisational perception of what policing should be about, the real and imagined pressures on police officers and how these feed and shape certain aspects of culture and officers' self-legitimacy?

By reflecting on established research, independent reviews and public inquiries, this article suggests that the prevailing logic of policing as primarily about fighting crime, and the themes of masculinity that underpin this, drives and reinforces key elements of the problematic features of police culture and misconduct—including misogyny. This orienting logic provides the organisation—and its officers—with a hero and protector status who ought to be willing to deploy coercion and respond to 'bad' people. It is also embedded within a much wider political and social culture which places crime at the doors of the socially, economically and politically marginal, and consistently ignores the crimes and harms of the powerful and wealthy. This highlights the reality that any shift in the purpose of policing also requires political and societal support. Although this article predominantly focusses on VAWG, it is important to acknowledge ongoing concerns around institutional racism and homophobia in policing—as found in the 2023 Baroness Casey review and various Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) investigations. It should also be noted that this discussion is not solely about the MPS, but state policing across England and Wales.<sup>3</sup>

## Taking police culture seriously

Police culture is one of the most prominent concepts in the social study of policing. It is a term that refers to a set of shared attitudes,

<sup>3</sup>L. Casey, *Final Report: An Independent Review into the Standards of Behaviour and Internal Culture of the Metropolitan Police Service*, London, Metropolitan Police Service, 2023; Independent Office for Police Conduct, *Inappropriate Photographs Taken at a Crime Scene*, London, Metropolitan Police Service, 2020; Independent Office for Police Conduct, *Independent Review into the use of Whatsapp and other Instant Messaging Applications with the Police Service*, London, Metropolitan Police Service, 2023; Undercover Policing Inquiry, *Tranche 1 interim report: Special Demonstration Squad Officers and Managers and those Affected by Deployments (1968–1982)*, London, Home Office, 2023.

values, beliefs and behaviour that characterises the police as an occupation and institution. The informal values, assumptions and beliefs that comprise the police identity shapes both how officers perceive and talk about their working environment and how they act within it. The features of police culture are influenced by the challenges associated with the police vocation, and the distinctive relationship officers have with their publics, the exercise of authority and the potential for and exposure to violence and trauma.<sup>4</sup>

The existence of an informal culture and ways of working that operates beneath the presentational front of police organisations has piqued the interest of academics because of the unique and powerful role that officers play in societies—including their widespread interactions with different strata of the public. The sanctioned ability to threaten or deploy coercive force against the public sets the police apart from other state institutions. Although the police are an important provider of citizen safety, they are also an agency that presents a threat to public security and wellbeing when officers abuse their powers or respond inadequately to calls for assistance.

Robert Reiner has infamously outlined the ‘core characteristics’ of police culture as comprising: an exaggerated sense of mission towards the police role, with officers craving work that promises excitement; the celebration of masculine exploits, with a willingness to use force during interactions; privileging on-the-job experience over official directives; a suspicious disposition that stereotypes certain people as more likely to be involved in crime; feelings of social isolation from ordinary members of the public; and a defensive sense of solidarity with colleagues. In addition, the culture is marked by cynicism, pessimism, secrecy and a gallows humour.<sup>5</sup>

The problematic consequences of police culture broadly coalesce around three concerns. First, the perennial features are marked out for being impervious to reform initiatives.

The second major problem of police culture is that it can influence the service that different sections of society receive—often for the worse. Finally, the culture can have a negative effect on relations between police officers within the organisation, with colleagues from under-represented groups reporting prejudice and exclusion.

Portrayals of a monolithic, inflexible and negative police culture have, however, been subject to critique by academics and practitioners. More policing scholars than ever have called into question the existence and strength of these features within officers’ cultural milieu. They advocate for a more nuanced and diversified way of understanding the complexities of the police identity and behaviour. This wave of critique has implied that the idea of police culture has lost its analytical and explanatory purchase, and that its key characteristics have been overstated. Today, the literature on police culture is distinguishable by the way it portrays police culture as changed, or at least changing. Since researchers set out to emphasise the novel features of police culture, it is commonplace to read the argument that the core-characteristics-schema that has defined much scholarship is today outdated, simplistic and unfairly critical.

Our concern is that this dominant flow of traffic within writings on police culture is at risk of being dismissive of police culture as a concept, particularly in terms of recognising its enduring characteristics which—while never universal—have been pushed underground. Interrogating the supposed universality and strength of police culture is a worthy endeavour, but the onslaught of scandals currently exposing the violations and devastating harms by officers provide a stark reminder that the most toxic aspects of police culture have not gone away. On the contrary, the worst of the features are alive and well, and this leaves us with questions around how to reconcile these differing accounts of police culture. A central finding of the Baroness Casey review is the acknowledgement that institutional racism, sexism and homophobia remain unchanged, have been allowed to persist, and are tied to a particular logic of policing. We are, then, reminded that whilst aspects of police culture may be in transition, it is nevertheless marked by an enduring core of

<sup>4</sup>B. Loftus, *Expert Report Prepared for the Joint Federation/Provincial Commission into the April 2020 Nova Scotia Mass Casualty*, Nova Scotia Joint Federation/Provincial Commission, 2022.

<sup>5</sup>R. Reiner, *The Politics of the Police*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.

dispositions and behaviours. Many aspects of the obdurate characteristics that lie at the centre of police culture—hypermasculinity, misogyny, racism, collusion and other recognisable features—are brazenly on display in recent scandals and appear particularly potent within discrete, specialist police units that operate on the margins of police organisations.<sup>6</sup>

## Culture in the shadows—specialist units and masculinity

For all the literature on police culture, researchers have concentrated disproportionately on ordinary rank-and-file officers who are public facing, often uniformed and visible—features that arguably render them more susceptible to oversight and governance. It is also here where the racial, ethnic and gender diversification of policing is strongest, and at risk of being lost through resignations, lack of promotions and a lack of recruitment into specialist units.<sup>7</sup> Some studies have examined the interior workings of specialist units, but comprehensive research in this area remains profoundly under-developed. There is, in particular, a deficiency in our understanding of what culture looks like inside such environments—and, indeed, whether and how the most dysfunctional features of the culture are produced, accommodated and reinforced. The crimes committed by Wayne Couzens, David Carrick and other serving officers have prompted serious questions not only about a misogynistic culture, but also, the prevalence of police-perpetrated VAWG within these distinct and shielded arenas of policing.

There is little understanding of the nature and scale of police-perpetrated VAWG, both in the course of their duties as public officers and in their private lives with intimate partners. In one US study, Goodmark found that

the powers and training provided to officers by the state renders them particularly dangerous as abusers.<sup>8</sup> She argues that intimate partner abuse by officers is a systemic problem that is created and sustained by the ways in which they are formally and informally socialised and instructed. In England and Wales, the Centre for Women's Justice recently brought a super-complaint against police forces alleging that they were not responding appropriately to police-perpetrated domestic violence, and that abusive officers were being protected by the wider police organisation. A joint investigation into the matter was conducted by the Chief Executive of the College of Policing, HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary and the Director General of the IOPC, who confirmed the allegations that police forces did not wholly recognise and appropriately respond to the risks and responsibilities associated with such cases, and that there were systemic deficiencies in the police response. The investigating panel pointed to the harm done to victims and the public interest and, in so doing, echoed the notion that the state has a serious stake in the conversation about police-perpetrated domestic abuse, because it trains abusers, helps to create a culture in which violence and intimidation are normalised, and depends upon the same abusers to enforce the laws they are breaking in their own intimate relationships.<sup>9</sup>

Although women are entering the police profession in greater numbers, policing continues to be a predominantly male profession. This is particularly true of some specialist operations units—such as those organised around firearms. Such units continue to be the preserve of white male officers, allowing for the survival and

<sup>8</sup>L. Goodmark, 'Hands up at home: militarized masculinity and police officers who commit intimate partner abuse', *Brigham Young University Law Review*, vol. 5, no. 5, 2015, pp. 1183–246.

<sup>9</sup>HMICFRS, CoP and IOPC, 'Police perpetrated domestic abuse: report on the Centre for Women's Justice super-complaint', 23 November 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/police-super-complaints-force-response-to-police-perpetrated-domestic-abuse/police-perpetrated-domestic-abuse-report-on-the-centre-for-womens-justice-super-complaint>

<sup>6</sup>Both Wayne Couzens and David Carrick worked for the elite Parliamentary and Diplomatic Protection Branch (PaDPB).

<sup>7</sup>Home Office, 'Police workforce: England and Wales: 31 March 2022', 27 July 2022; <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-workforce-england-and-wales-31-march-2022/police-workforce-england-and-wales-31-march-2022>

expression of a particularly problematic form of masculinity.<sup>10</sup> Researchers have identified hegemonic masculinity as central to police culture, the features of which comprise: an emphasis on aggressive action, competitiveness and the imagery of violence; an intense heterosexual orientation that is often articulated in terms of sexist and patriarchal attitudes; the construction of in-group/out-group distinctions whose consequences are exclusionary for the out-groups and assertive of loyalty and affinity in the case of in-groups. The theme of masculinity within police culture is the product of a wider structure of gender norms and is deeply enmeshed within the history of police organisations and their hierarchical structures.

A related consideration lies with questions surrounding the partial militarisation of the police. While policing has always been quasi-militarised in respect to hierarchical, command-oriented structures and internal logic, in some specialist areas, the boundaries between policing and the military have become increasingly blurred. Specialist police squads—particularly those concerned with armed response or public order policing such as the MPS Territorial Support Group—are distinguished from mainstream policing owing to their military-style training, uniforms and equipment, philosophy and structural organisation, and overarching mission to threaten or deploy force collectively. These are areas of policing from which women—and officers of colour—are largely excluded and which have been the subject of criticism owing to an apparent retreat from community-orientated policing and gender/racial integration, as well as an emphasis on machismo and violence.

Since these specialist units are considered to be somewhat elitist, they are difficult to join and have low levels of staff turnover as a result. Moreover, such spaces are, ‘hotbeds of the most warrior-like aspects of [street police culture](#), embodying norms and values of hypermasculinity, insularity,

competition and bias’.<sup>11</sup> This has been confirmed by recent investigations into the police. Although trivialised by the police as harmless banter, the language and sentiments espoused by some officers and trusted peers within these units act as a cover for misogyny, racism, homophobia and other forms of prejudice. In one investigation by the IOPC, the WhatsApp messages distributed between officers were found to objectify sexually and denigrate women, and included phrases such as, ‘I would happily rape [name of a female colleague]’. It also found that some colleagues were afraid to speak out about these behaviours for fear of being ostracised, demeaned or forced to move to a different role.<sup>12</sup>

Such investigations have also confirmed the continued prevalence of the blue wall of silence within policing, and this provides a protective environment for officers who promote dangerous views and engage in noxious behaviour. The veil of secrecy and solidarity apparent in the scandals served to conceal police-perpetrated violence and misogyny and was most evident between colleagues, although in some cases those in supervisory positions were implicated in covering up unacceptable behaviours and crimes.

## When police do bad things

Police officers are a largely iconised group, and public connection to policing provokes a deep emotional response.<sup>13</sup> What, then, do revelations about serious criminal offences committed by serving police officers do to our understandings of this potent cultural symbol? There is little doubt that the recent revelations have shocked the national collective. We inhabit a moment when violence and misogyny stand forth as the archetypal police evil. The scandals have illuminated the horrors that pervade British policing, drastically challenging the assumption—one at least

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>IOPC, *Independent Review into the use of Whatsapp and other Instant Messaging Applications with the Police Service*, 2023.

<sup>13</sup>Of course, this emotional commitment to policing is not felt in equal measure. For excluded or disenfranchised populations, the police already evoke feelings of anxiety and fear.

<sup>10</sup>T. A. Quinlan, ‘Casey review shows how “warrior culture” drives policing in the UK’, *The Conversation*, 22 March 2023; <https://theconversation.com/met-police-casey-review-shows-how-warrior-culture-drives-policing-in-the-uk-202269#:~:text=Warrior%20culture%20describes%20a%20police,%2C%20rather%20than%20de%2Descalation>.

held by the publics that do not find themselves on the receiving end of adverse policing—that officers are inherently moral, redeemable heroes. The extreme depravity committed by those officers at the heart of the scandals is ontologically devastating. When faced with police-perpetuated crime and deviance, the abuse of power is shocking, principally because of the ‘honest cop belief’—the broad ‘self-identification of officers as essentially good people with high moral standards’.<sup>14</sup> This belief in the unassailable goodness of the police results in fellow officers turning a largely unintentional blind eye to corrupt behaviour and, in so doing, perpetuates a culture of denial. When confronted with evidence that officers are capable of unthinkable and morally reprehensible behaviours, the police—and, indeed, much of the public—find this reality hard to stomach. It is the honest cop belief that underpins the rhetorical myth of police deviance resulting from a few bad apples.

## A clarion call for organisational reform

In the aftermath of recent disclosures, there have been predictable calls to tighten the vetting process as a means of preventing potentially dangerous or intolerant people from joining the police. Yet, inspecting the background credentials of individual police officers is unlikely to solve the problem. Neither is it sensible to simply dismiss the cases as rare anomalies or episodic events. Whilst there is no easy answer, this final section briefly examines promising strategies for police reform, responding to some of the fundamental aspects of police culture set out in the first section of this piece. It argues that it is time to review critically and systematically police organisational structure and, indeed, the very purpose and role of the state police.

The nature of crime today creates challenges for law enforcement that cannot always be met by traditional methods of policing. In 2023, for instance, fraud and computer misuse offences

<sup>14</sup>B. Brookshaw, *What Happened within the Police Service when the Government Created the Offence of “Corrupt or Improper Practice” in Section 26 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015?*, PhD Thesis, Portsmouth, University of Portsmouth, 2023.

made up half of all crimes reported to the Crime Survey for England and Wales, and violent crime continues to fall. Domestic abuse and sexual violence place significant demand on police organisations, with new legislation on coercive control and non-fatal strangulation requiring different approaches to first response policing and investigations. The secondary impact of floundering public services, particularly those related to health and mental illness, are acutely felt on the frontline of policing, as are the residual implications of the Covid-19 lockdowns on the mental health of the nation. Social conflict, public sector strikes, international wars and related protest have forced police services into the unenviable position of mediating between different social groups amidst fractured communities and politically contested positions. Police officers are no longer—and arguably have never been—just crime fighters, and officially acknowledging that socially valuable role of first responders is long overdue. Any endeavour that aims to move away from the crime fighter conception of policing comes with a requirement to rethink who to recruit and then how to train, equip and uniform police services. At the moment, efforts to improve responses to mental health incidents are paradoxically justified, with returning response officers to fighting crime as seen, for instance, in the introduction of the Right Care, Right Person scheme, which may be counter-productive in acknowledging changing police priorities.<sup>15</sup>

There has been a sustained interest in the prospect of new leadership models as a promoter of reform within police organisations, and in responses to some of the scandals exposed in policing, addressing leadership failures was regarded as a valuable area of reform. While traditional leadership models rely on the enforcement of asymmetrical contractual relationships between bosses and subordinates, transformational approaches are based upon the values of participation, organisational citizenship and consultation inclusion. In one piece of research, Silvestri found that senior policewomen adopted distinctly different leadership styles, and these tended to mirror consultative and participatory

<sup>15</sup>For a more in-depth discussion of this scheme, see Crawford and Bird, and Bryant and Kadiri in this collection.

approaches.<sup>16</sup> This is not to suggest that simply moving more women into senior leadership roles will change police culture, but a critical reflection on current leadership models—and promotion processes—is overdue. Although the College of Policing has recently produced new leadership standards, it is important to review the impact of these on police organisations and their culture.

There is also mounting agreement that police organisations can benefit from bottom-up approaches to police reform where rank-and-file officers are actively involved in the process and contribute their own views and experiences to solve problems. In a review of a novel intervention in a California police department established to regulate excessive force by officers, it was found that a large part of its success rested on officers' belief that the approach did not focus primarily on the threat of disciplinary action. Instead, the intervention was run by frontline officers—some of whom had problematic histories of using excessive force against the public—and involved meeting twice a week for several months to review behavioural patterns and encourage self-critique. The officers had a personal stake in studying and reflecting upon the problem of conflict with citizens and were, therefore, best placed to fully comprehend these encounters and offer solutions.<sup>17</sup>

A genuine commitment to diversifying the composition of police workforces throughout the whole organisation may dampen the effects of traditional police culture by introducing new actors with different perspectives, backgrounds and approaches. This would involve taking seriously demands for different work patterns, different routes through the police career and ensuring retention of diverse police officers. Recruitment drives ought to consider the varied social roles of policing and acknowledge that these require a range of different skills, personalities and attitudes. Recruitment campaigns often tell only a partial story of policing and can have a significant impact on who considers the role. An analysis of recruitment videos and

other materials launched in New Zealand in 2017—which had a proclaimed aim of being inclusive and addressing negative perceptions of the police—highlights the value of promoting empathy and being informative about the realities of police work.<sup>18</sup> The emphasis in the campaigns on bringing 'yourself' to the police role highlighted the tension between the common shared identities of police officers in uniform and individual/personal values and approaches to police work. This tension is important and offers a realistic prospect: as police organisations become staffed throughout all ranks and units by more diverse people—university graduates, civilians, women, people from racialised and minority ethnic backgrounds, LGBTQ+ personnel and neurodiverse individuals—internal cultures will adapt to reflect better the diverse experiences and outlooks of their members. Hiring and promoting more people from previously excluded backgrounds will not on its own be enough to change the culture of policing radically. A vitally important aspect is retaining this talent and providing them with access to all aspects of policing. New guises of police officers can contribute new perspectives and distinctive characteristics to workplace identities that ultimately have positive effects on police organisations—and may also reduce the anxiety and fear that marginalised members of the public have towards the police.

Similarly, changes to the point of entry of new recruits into police organisations can reshape the culture. When first introduced, direct entry schemes that allow a person to join the police at a senior level represented a radical shift from the British policing principle that all new recruits must start at the rank of police constable. One study has found that direct entrants who joined the police organisation at the higher ranks demonstrated a level of self-awareness not usually seen amongst officers and were more confident about questioning established practices.<sup>19</sup> However, other police

<sup>16</sup>M. Silvestri, 'Doing police leadership: Enter the "new smart macho"', *Policing and Society*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2007, pp. 38–58.

<sup>17</sup>H. Toch, 'Police officers as change agents in police reform', *Policing and Society*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2008, pp. 60–71.

<sup>18</sup>A. Nairn and R. Roebuck, 'Promoting the police: a thematic analysis of the New Zealand police recruitment campaigns and the construction of officers' identities', *Journal of Criminology*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2022, pp. 221–238.

<sup>19</sup>R. Smith, 'Don't call me Ma'am: direct entry into leadership roles in British policing', *Police Journal*, vol. 89, no. 4, 2016, pp. 311–26.



officers opposed the new career pathway and did not necessarily welcome direct entry colleagues, with the credibility of the latter being a point of critique. Demand from police services in fast-track and direct entry schemes has been low, and there is a need to better understand the resistance to and failures of these schemes.

An allied debate is the trend towards better educated police recruits, with a particular focus on whether officers who hold university degrees can reshape police culture. The article commented earlier on the remaining influence of police trainers on the acculturation of police recruits, and suggests that offering different perspectives at this stage is key to unsettling some persistent cultural features of policing and supporting the values of a learning organisation. Enhancing the educational background of police has been praised as a positive development, since it alters the profile of policing and breaks down its institutional isolationism. Researchers in the US have found that although higher education did not have any meaningful impact on whether officers arrested or searched citizens, it nevertheless significantly reduced violence and the use of force during encounters.<sup>20</sup> The gradual undermining by the UK government of the initial ambition of Policing Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) to ensure that all officers achieve a degree is a real setback, in our view.

An often-overlooked aspect of changing internal culture is the care and support given to police officers working in stressful, busy environments with a high level of exposure to the effects of and potential for violence, as well as the trauma resulting from experiences of crime, accidents, injuries and mental health distress. At its core, policing is a dirty work occupation.<sup>21</sup> Officers are expected to deal with noxious events and interact with troubled and disadvantaged people, making their work at times unpleasant, degrading and traumatic. Whilst there is an increasing recognition of the role of mental health problems on officer performance, sickness levels and suicide, its

influence in feeding negative and dysfunctional aspects of police culture is less acknowledged. Police organisations ought to pay much more than lip service to offering officers access to supportive, timely and appropriate mechanisms to deal with the personal impacts of their roles. Senior leaders need to ensure that organisational stressors are addressed at a time when police demand is high, when officers feel over-burdened and pushed into accepting additional paid work to cope with a cost-of-living crisis. It is incumbent on police organisations to ensure that officers maintain a healthy work-life balance and not over-identify with their role to the extent of losing their own individual values, identities and moral compass. Police organisations that care for their officers and value their well-being, model a culture of compassion and inclusion. Enhanced psychological support for officers should go hand-in-hand with the strategies for cultural reform that the article has advocated.

## Concluding thoughts

Police officers—and the organisations they are part of—are not insulated from the broader political, social, cultural and economic climate. If organisational and cultural change is to occur, then significant alterations are also needed to the societal configuration in which officers operate and craft their occupational culture. In this way, key moments in policing history that make their way into the public and political consciousness have the potential to stimulate meaningful reform in the police and the larger society. The horrors and personal tragedies underpinning recent scandals have not only stimulated a national conversation about policing and the kinds of officers we want as a society; they have also forced a serious debate about the deep problem of male violence against women. More research is needed to examine what culture looks like within the specialist police units at the heart of the scandals, with a particular emphasis on how the most dysfunctional features are being produced, accommodated and reinforced. Conversely, there would be much benefit also to exploring other specialist units who might be expected to have different internal cultures owing to staffing differences and their overarching purpose—such as PVPUs.

<sup>20</sup>J. Rydberg and W. Terrill, 'The effect of higher education on police behaviour', *Police Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2010, pp. 92–120.

<sup>21</sup>P. Dick, 'Dirty work designations: how police officers account for their use of coercive force', *Human Relations*, vol. 58, no. 11, 2005, pp. 1363–1390.

It is time that politicians and strategic others recognise the inescapable symbiosis between the features of police culture and the dysfunctions of society to formulate more intelligent and radical policy responses. Improving the underlying conditions and inequalities that cause crime—and committing financial investment that radically undermines the structures and cultures of societal manifestations of exclusion and hate—would represent an unprecedented reframing of the policy response. Social policies that are ultimately aimed at creating a

safer, less fractured and socially just society, may make policing less confrontational and, with it, less masculinist. Governments can therefore play a pivotal role in reforming the problematic expressions of police culture and, perhaps, begin to repair the damaged trust and outrage that currently stains police organisations.

*Martina Feilzer* is a Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Bangor University. *Bethan Loftus* is a Reader in Criminology and Criminal Justice at Bangor University.