



# Volunteers and vulnerabilities: the politics of policing partnerships

## Key points

- ‘Vulnerability’ offers a lens to study partnerships between the police, law enforcement agencies, volunteer groups and the public.
- New technologies, such as reporting apps, offer the police unparalleled opportunities for intelligence-gathering from partners - they are transforming what partnership and public engagement mean.
- Volunteers and the public are a source of data for the police (e.g. reporting suspicious behaviour or potential exploitation) but the police rarely inform these partners about how data is used.
- The absence of feedback in police-public-volunteer relationships threatens to erode the trust that collaborative initiatives are supposed to foster.
- Partnerships between the police and volunteer organisations - and public engagement campaigns around vulnerability - should be more transparent: information that is provided to protect people can also be used for enforcement.



# Summary

**Police and law enforcement agencies increasingly partner with the public and volunteer organisations. This is particularly the case around vulnerability and exploitation that “hides in plain sight” – such as modern slavery reporting and monitoring coastal areas for criminal activity.**

Citizen involvement, public engagement and volunteer partnerships around these issues offer the police new forms of intelligence-gathering – and technologies allow the capture of more information from everyday life than ever before. We found that

partnerships around ‘vulnerability’ are characterised by a tension: between protecting vulnerable people and expanding criminal and immigration enforcement. More specifically, the circulation of data within and across police networks with partners hides this tension and produces problems with transparency, trust and consent.

# Background

**British law enforcement agencies are keen to develop partnerships with the public and volunteer organisations in order to tackle the local effects of global security challenges such as modern slavery, human trafficking and smuggling.**

The public and civil society organisations are encouraged to act as the eyes and ears of the police – from spotting risky or suspicious activity at coastal areas to reporting potential exploitation in car washes or nail bars. These collaborations are often framed around the need to identify and protect the ‘vulnerable’, and they are shaped by the twin pressures of austerity and the growing demand for integrated, multi-agency responses to intractable criminal and social problems. Police partnerships and the use of volunteers has been criticised as both an expansion of criminal justice activity into everyday life, and a withdrawal of policing resources.

British police have always relied on citizen engagement and volunteers. The national Citizens in Policing (CiP) portfolio aims to maintain recruitment for the Special Constabulary and Police Support Volunteers at a time when volunteer numbers nationally are falling. The focus of our study was the partnerships that police build with organisations and groups outside of formal police volunteering roles – for instance, public engagement campaigns mobilising people to be alert to criminality in

everyday life and collaborations with charities to address specific forms of exploitation.

Technology is transforming these partnerships: it enables the mass collection, sharing and analysis of information, often through reporting apps which generate new data flows for intelligence-gathering. When citizens are expected to take on more roles in public safety and security, new challenges are created. In a time of growing political division and hostility in public spaces (e.g. disputes about flag displays, rises in race hate crimes), making citizens responsible for reporting “suspicious behaviour” brings risks. It is more important than ever to understand how community attitudes of fear and mistrust, as well as empathy and concern, are used for enforcement and security activity.

# What we did

**This research project investigated the networks of collaboration between police, allied security and law enforcement agencies, civil society groups, and the public in tackling vulnerabilities.**

Our research focused on two key case studies, both of which exemplify 'vulnerability': monitoring the UK's coastal borders and helping victims of modern slavery.

We particularly focused on the role of technologies (e.g. reporting apps) in mediating these networks. Our aims were to:

1. Examine the roles and activities that volunteers, citizen groups and the public undertake in policing vulnerability;

2. Investigate the relationships between voluntary and professional activity; and
3. Understand the effects generated by these collaborations.

The qualitative research combined desk-based analysis of policy and strategy documents with 30 hours' ethnographic fieldwork and over 50 research interviews and meetings. Our research participants included six police forces across England, coastal safety volunteer groups, charities working to tackle modern slavery, maritime security consultancies, and a security technology company. We mapped the partnerships that form around 'vulnerability' in our case study contexts and investigated the flows of information within (and beyond) them.

## Key findings

**'Vulnerability' is being used in highly strategic ways.** Vulnerability enables the police to create diverse volunteer and public partnerships. It also legitimises the expansion of criminal justice agendas into new social domains, including leisure and community activities.

**Coastal borders and modern slavery engage local volunteers in global issues.** Although voluntary partnerships addressing these issues resemble older styles of community policing, they are implicated in different scales of intervention. The desire to 'help' or 'protect' vulnerable individuals locally becomes a valuable resource for national and international security and policing agendas. So, for instance, a modern slavery report made about an exploited individual can be used to build knowledge for tackling transnational trafficking.

**Non-policing and non-security activity is transformed to expand enforcement.** Partnerships become a means for the police to harness volunteers' specialist skills, experience and local expert knowledge for different agendas. We refer to this as 'salvage security'.

**A lack of reciprocity and transparency.** The 'salvaging' of information and expertise from the public and volunteer groups by police frequently produces one-way information flows. Digitisation, particularly through reporting apps, transforms public engagement into data capture, with few opportunities for meaningful two-way interaction.

**Data analytics are changing the nature of public intelligence.** The distinction between information and intelligence - which is central to police work - is shifting with the widespread use of data analytics. Public reporting apps generate a lot of 'noise' but this information can - via machine learning, for instance - produce tools to assess risk and potential criminality. Local knowledge becomes circulated and re-purposed for general enforcement purposes, often without the knowledge or awareness of the public.

**Protection and enforcement held in tension.** There is a critical, and often unacknowledged, tension between the protective motivations of volunteers and the enforcement outcomes of their engagement with police. The public and partners trust the police to balance criminal justice enforcement with protecting vulnerable people - yet the information they provide often triggers punitive actions. This is especially problematic in the context of modern slavery, where reporting can lead to victims being treated as immigration offenders rather than being referred into protection mechanisms.

**Hidden outcomes can erode trust in partnerships.** The outcomes of partnering with the police are often hidden from civil society groups and the public: there is rarely any feedback on what happens to the information they provide. This lack of transparency creates significant ethical issues around informed consent - but it also risks the long-term sustainability of these partnerships.

# Next steps

Based on our findings, it is clear that while police-public-volunteer partnerships around vulnerability offer significant opportunities, they also generate risks to community trust and the wellbeing of vulnerable individuals. To address these challenges, we propose the following recommendations.

## Enhance transparency and feedback within partnership

Police forces and associated law enforcement agencies should enhance transparency in their partnerships with the public and civil society partners. This might involve communicating potential protection-prosecution tensions in the context of modern slavery where victims may also be immigration offenders. The current one-way flow of information poses questions for civil society organisations and the police. Creating robust feedback loops to inform volunteer groups and the public about the general outcomes of their reporting (while respecting operational sensitivities) is crucial for building and maintaining trust. Agencies should establish clear protocols for data sharing, particularly around immigration enforcement, and be explicit about how intelligence gathered from the public is used.

## Question the use of information and data

Similarly, organisations that partner with the police should be willing to ask questions about use of data and information. So, for instance: Is data being used to train algorithms or generate models for police work?

Is data shared between different parts of the police or with other law enforcement agencies (e.g. modern slavery and immigration enforcement)? How exactly is data used - for operational and analytical purposes?

## Advocate for safe reporting mechanisms

Charities and volunteer organisations that partner with law enforcement have a responsibility to advocate for the safety and rights of the vulnerable individuals they serve. They should proactively seek clarification from police partners on data-sharing agreements and the potential consequences of reporting. These organisations can play a key role in developing informed consent procedures, ensuring that volunteers and the individuals they support understand how information might be used by authorities. They should also advocate for the creation of safe reporting mechanisms and firewalls that separate victim support and protection from immigration enforcement activities. This could help ensure that fear of deportation does not prevent victims from seeking help.

# Authors

## The research team were:

Dr Alex Hall, University of York;  
Dr Hannah Lewis, University of Sheffield;  
Professor Louise Waite, University of Leeds;  
Dr Rodrigo Campos, University of York.

# For further information

Scan the QR code to read more about the project.

Lead investigator and author:

Dr Alex Hall  
alexandra.hall@york.ac.uk

Co-investigators and authors:

Dr Hannah Lewis, h.j.lewis@sheffield.ac.uk  
Professor Louise Waite, l.waite@leeds.ac.uk

