

Trust in the police



Overview

The UK policing model relies on public trust and consent. This POSTnote outlines recent trends in levels of public trust in the police, including variation between demographic groups. It summarises research on barriers to trust in the police and the effectiveness of different approaches to increasing trust. It also outlines stakeholder views on policy priorities. Policing is a devolved matter in the UK; this POSTnote focuses on England and Wales but presents findings from across the UK and draws on international research evidence.

- Evidence suggests that levels of trust and confidence in the police in England and Wales have declined in recent years and vary by ethnicity and gender.
- Trust can be affected by individual and group experiences of the police, police conduct and performance, and media coverage of the police.
- Research suggests that trust in the police is more highly correlated with perceptions of police fairness than with perceptions of effectiveness in dealing with crime.
- Key factors that increase public trust in the police include improving the quality of interactions between officers and members of the public and increasing aspects of community policing that are focused on addressing local concerns.
- Stakeholders have identified several policy priorities, including improving: transparency and accountability; police performance and culture; police-public interactions; and police visibility, community engagement and local problem solving.

Background

The concept of 'policing by consent' is central to the British model of policing and asserts that the power of police to execute their duties depends on the common consent of the public¹⁻⁶ (see Commons Library note [Policing in the UK](#)).

For policing by consent to be effective, the police require the trust and confidence of the public.^{2,4} High levels of trust and confidence in the police in England and Wales have been shown to facilitate compliance and cooperation with the police.⁷⁻⁹ In the Strategic Policing Requirement 2023, the Home Secretary states that "improving trust and confidence in policing" is a key objective for police as part of their response to tackling violence against women and girls.¹⁰

Definitions of 'trust' in the police

There are different definitions of 'trust' and 'confidence' in the police and the broader concept of 'legitimacy'.¹¹⁻¹⁴ In this POSTnote, trust in the police is defined as a belief in the reliability of the police to behave fairly and effectively during interactions.¹²⁻¹⁵

Trust in police encompasses trust in specific officers and the police service as an institution.^{13,14,16} People are more likely to trust the police if they have positive evaluations and expectations of the fairness, effectiveness, and integrity of the police.^{13,16} Confidence in the police represents a generalised support of the police, or the degree to which trust is systematically shown to be warranted.^{12,17,18}

Trends in levels of trust

Assessing trends in trust and confidence in the police requires careful consideration of the definitions, measures and recency of the data used. The terms 'trust' and 'confidence' are inconsistently applied in research investigating public attitudes towards the police.^{11,12,19} Some researchers argue that there should be separate measures to capture trust in specific officers and confidence in the police service as an institution.¹² However, much of the available research uses a single measure to refer to both trust and confidence.^{12,18,20-23}

Different measures of trust and confidence are used, which can make it difficult to evaluate trends over time.^{11,24-27} A large portion of research in this area relies on [cross-sectional studies](#), which capture perceptions of the police from a particular point in time. Some academics suggest that this limits the overall [standard of evidence](#) for understanding what causes changes in public perceptions towards the police.²⁸⁻³⁰

It is also important to note that data from 2022 may not reflect the public's response to the most recent events involving the police.

National trends based on the best available data are summarised below. This includes data from the annual Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW), a representative cross-sectional study of approximately 35,000 participants, monitoring experiences of crime in England and Wales.^{31,32}

Comparative regional data are limited. The CSEW contains some data on individual police forces in England and Wales; however, small sample sizes make it difficult to draw reliable comparisons between police force areas.³³ In London, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) Public Attitude Survey provides data on a number of indicators related to trust and confidence.³⁴

Overall trends

The CSEW found that from 2017/18 to 2021/22, the number of people who think the police are doing a "good" or "excellent" job fell from 62% to 52% and overall confidence in local police fell from 78% to 69%.^{33,35,36} It is important to note that data collection for the CSEW was interrupted in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic³⁷ and that the current CSEW data for 2021/22 are from a smaller sample than in previous years (approximately 20,000 participants).³³

Evidence of a decline in trust and confidence in the police is supported by other survey data. In November 2022, a representative YouGov poll of over 5,000 UK adults found that 49% had confidence in the police, compared to 58% in January 2019 (from approximately 4,000 UK adults).^{38,39} A similar decline was reported by the group More in Common, who surveyed a representative sample of over 2,000 British adults and found that trust in the police fell from 63% in February 2020 to 53% in November 2021, shortly after the sentencing of former Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) officer Wayne Couzens for the kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard.⁴⁰

Recent data suggest that levels of trust in the police in Great Britain have fallen in comparison to other countries.⁴¹⁻⁴³ The 2022 Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Index surveyed over 18,000 participants across 26 countries (using a representative sample of the British population) to compare global perceptions of trust in the police.⁴³ Great Britain fell from 6th place in 2021 (48% of British adults trusted the police), to 9th place in 2022 (44% of British adults trusted the police), however Great Britain remained above the global average (37%) in both years.^{42,43}

Variation between groups

Evidence from the CSEW suggests that public attitudes towards the police in England and Wales vary by ethnicity and gender.^{35,44,45} In 2020, people from Asian (77%), White (74%) and Other ethnic groups (75%) had greater confidence in their local police than Black people (64%).³⁵ In December 2022, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) Public Attitude Survey reported that 55% of Black Londoners "agreed" that the MPS is an organisation they can trust, compared to 71% of White British Londoners.³⁴

Between 2018 and 2020, the CSEW reported that women had greater overall confidence in the police than men across all ethnic groups.⁴⁶ However, in October 2021, the End Violence Against Women Coalition surveyed approximately 1,700 British adults and found that 47% of women reported that they now have less trust in the police following the sentencing of Wayne Couzens for the kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard.⁴⁷

Barriers to trust in the police

Trust can be affected by individual and group experiences of the police.^{48–50} There are multiple barriers to trust and confidence in the police, including negative media coverage of the police, police misconduct and negative public perceptions of police performance.

Media coverage of the police

UK-based research has suggested that the media is a primary source of information about the police for most people.^{51–53} The CSEW reported that 74% of adults in England and Wales had no contact with the police during the year ending March 2020, suggesting that perceptions of trust in the police are often driven by factors other than personal interactions.⁵⁴

It is difficult to assess the impact that media coverage of single events has on public attitudes towards the police. This is in part due to the unexpected timing of high-profile incidents involving the police and the difficulty of causally attributing changes in public perceptions to the media coverage of particular events.^{29,55} However, a growing body of research does suggest that media coverage of high-profile incidents involving the police (see Box 1) can have a negative effect on public attitudes towards the police.^{29,55–58}

Box 1: Recent high-profile incidents involving the police

Several recent events have been put forward as contributing to a decline in public trust in the police across England and Wales, including:

- The reports of multiple failures of West Midlands Police with respect to the murders of Raneem Oudeh and Khaola Saleem in Solihull in 2018.^{59,60}
- The police-killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA in 2020, prompting widespread discussion of existing racial inequality in the application of police powers in the UK.^{61–64}
- The kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard by MPS Officer Wayne Couzens in 2021, and the subsequent policing of her vigil and investigation into offensive Whatsapp messages by officers linked to Wayne Couzens.^{65–68}
- The reports and sentencing of the MPS Officer David Carrick in 2023 for the serial rapes of multiple women.^{69,70}

Police performance

Research suggests that public perceptions of police performance in tackling crime are associated with levels of trust and confidence in the police.^{71–74} This includes police performance in relation to violence against women and girls, 'day-to-day' crime, and fraud and economic crime.

Handling of violence against women and girls (VAWG)

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services' (HMICFRS) 2021 report on police engagement with women and girls called for VAWG offences to be prioritised.⁷⁵

Research suggests that poor treatment of victims by investigators and first responders can decrease victims' trust and confidence in the police.^{76,77} The 2022 Home Affairs Committee report on the investigation and prosecution of rape called for a focus on the experience of victims attempting to navigate the justice system.⁷⁸

Building on the Government's 2021 Rape Review,⁷⁹ Operation Soteria Bluestone aims to develop a new national model for investigating rape and serious sexual assault.⁸⁰ The Operation's one year report found that police investigators lack sufficient specialist knowledge about sexual offending, place too much focus on testing the credibility of victims, and that police learning and development in this area is currently inadequate.⁸⁰

'Day-to-day' crime

In 2022, the former Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales, Dame Vera Baird KC, stated that "day-to-day" crime "isn't being dealt with well by the police".⁸¹

The 2023 More in Common report 'Where are the police?' found that, from a representative sample of over 2,000 British adults, 68% felt that the police have "given up on trying to solve crimes like shoplifting and burglaries altogether".⁴⁰

HMICFRS's 2022 report on the police response to serious acquisitive crime found that forces often lack capacity to investigate domestic burglary, personal robbery and theft.⁸² In October 2022, police chiefs in England and Wales committed to ensuring that all home burglaries will be attended by the police.⁸³

Fraud and economic crime

The CSEW estimated that there were 3.8 million fraud offences in England and Wales in the year ending June 2022.⁸⁴ Based on the self-reported experiences of CSEW respondents, fraud accounted for approximately 41% of all estimated crime against individuals during this period.⁸⁴⁻⁸⁶

However, in March 2023 the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee reported that only around 1% of police are dedicated to fraud.⁸⁶ The National Audit Office's 2022 report on 'Progress combatting fraud' found that "the threat from fraud is increasing and evolving but the number of frauds resulting in a charge or summons is falling".⁸⁵

Victim accounts of online fraud in the UK suggest that many people choose not to contact the police because they feel it is unlikely that anything will be done.^{87,88} The Public Accounts Committee reported that "victims of fraud are being failed", which risks undermining public trust in the police, and called on the Government to publish its fraud strategy without delay.⁸⁶

Police vetting, complaints and misconduct

Incidents of police misconduct can have a negative impact on public perceptions of the police.^{64,89,90} In the year ending March 2022, police forces in England and Wales finalised 48,979 complaints cases involving police officers, concerning a total of 115,235 allegations against officers made by members of the public.⁹¹

In an inspection into vetting, misconduct, and misogyny in the police service, HMICFRS concluded that vetting standards are not high enough and that, "it is too easy for the wrong people both to join and to stay in the police".⁹²

In the final wave of the 2021/2022 Public Perceptions Tracker Summary Report (March 2022), the Independent Office for Police Conduct reported that 50% of the public are "not confident that the police deals fairly with complaints", overtaking those who are confident (37%) for the first time since 2017.⁹³

In January 2023, a representative YouGov poll of over 5,000 UK adults found that 67% were either "not very confident" or "not at all confident" in the police's ability to investigate officer and staff misconduct.⁹⁴

Transparency and accountability

Police accountability mechanisms, through which citizens can collect evidence, file complaints, raise awareness, and monitor police performance can foster public trust in the police.⁹⁵⁻⁹⁷

Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) are responsible for monitoring the performance of police forces, holding chief constables to account, and are scrutinised by Police and Crime Panels (PCPs; see Commons Library note [Police and Crime Commissioners](#) and Lords Library note [Police and crime panels](#)).^{98,99}

Stakeholders, including academics and independent think tanks, have suggested that a lack of formal sanctioning powers has hampered the development of constructive and effective relationships between PCCs and PCPs in some force areas.^{100,101} In 2020, the Local Government Association stated that more work is needed to raise public awareness of PCCs to improve accountability.¹⁰² In 2021, the Home Office began a review into the role of PCCs.^{103,104} The recommendations from Part Two of the PCC review state that the Home Office will "amend the core PCC Guidance to reflect the PCC role in securing and maintaining public confidence in policing".^{103,105}

In March 2022, the Government published its response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report, 'Inclusive Britain' which, among other things, recommended creating partnerships between police and communities to build trust.¹⁰⁶ Action ten of the response stated that, by summer 2023, the Home Office will deliver a new national framework for how the use of police powers (including stop and search and use of force) are scrutinised at a local level.¹⁰⁶

Approaches to increase trust

There is evidence on approaches to increase trust from the UK, United States and Australia.^{97,107-110} The model and context of policing differs between countries, and impacts may vary. However, findings highlight two key approaches to increasing trust: encouraging procedural justice, which aims to ensure that people feel they are

treated in a procedurally fair and just way;^{7,107,109,111,112} and effective community policing, where police and communities collaborate to tackle local issues.^{108,113,114}

Procedural justice

Trust in the police has been found to be more highly correlated with perceptions of police fairness than with perceptions of effectiveness in dealing with crime.^{115–118} There is extensive research showing that greater emphasis on ensuring officers interact with members of the public in a “procedurally just” way is likely to increase trust in the police (see Box 2).^{107,112,119–124} This suggests that single, short-term interactions with officers can influence public attitudes towards the police.^{125–130}

Box 2: Principles of procedural justice in policing

Procedural justice concerns the treatment of people during their interactions with authority.^{22,27,111,131–134} Research into procedural justice in policing emphasises four factors for encouraging positive interactions between officers and members of the public, these include:

- **Voice:** giving people the opportunity to express their side of the story;
- **Respect:** treating individuals fairly and with dignity;
- **Neutrality:** making rational and unbiased decisions; and
- **Trustworthiness:** demonstrating that the intentions and actions of the police are aligned with community values.^{135–138}

Other key examples of good treatment by the police relevant to procedurally just encounters include being “approachable and friendly”, and spending time explaining decisions to citizens.^{2,49}

From a nationally representative survey of over 7,000 respondents aged 16 and over in England and Wales, trust in procedural fairness was found to be a strong predictor of moral alignment with the police, and a moderate predictor of obedience to the police.⁹

A 2015 [systematic review](#) of 28 studies from different countries (including one from the UK) found that citizens’ perceptions of procedural justice during interactions with the police positively influence levels of trust and confidence in the police.¹⁰⁹ This finding is consistent across different demographic groups (including age, gender, and ethnicity).^{139,140}

In recent years, police services across the world have sought to implement principles of procedural justice to increase public trust in the police.¹⁰⁹ Trials conducted with the police in England and Wales suggest procedural justice training and checklists can support fair and just treatment of the public by police officers.^{141,142}

However, there is little evidence of the extent to which the principles of procedural justice are applied and monitored in public-police interactions in England and Wales. Some academics have highlighted that the predominance of self-report survey data in procedural justice research means that most of the evidence base is correlational and that the causal impact of strategies to improve trust is difficult to assess.^{107,110} Further, the degree to which a police encounter is perceived by the public to be

'procedurally just' can vary between observers.^{143,144} Research also highlights the role of prior interactions with the police (both direct, indirect and community-based) in shaping perceptions of trust and confidence.¹⁴⁵⁻¹⁴⁸

Disproportionate use of stop and search powers

Stop and search interactions are key moments that can define individual and community perceptions of trust in the police.^{9,149}

The disproportionate use of stop and search powers affects perceptions of police fairness, which in turn risks undermining the principles of procedural justice in policing.¹⁴⁹

In the year ending March 2022, Black people were searched 4.8 times more frequently in England and Wales than White people (using self-defined ethnicity and the ONS 2021 Census population estimates to calculate rates).¹⁵⁰

In December 2022, the MOPAC Public Attitude Survey reported that only 39% of Black Londoners believe that stop and search is used fairly by the MPS, compared to 66% of White Londoners.³⁴ Unfair and poorly targeted stop and search creates and reinforces mistrust between those subjected to it and the police (see Commons Library note [Police powers: stop and search](#)).

Community policing

Community policing covers a range of practices, such as increasing the frequency and visibility of police patrols, community engagement programmes, and local problem-oriented policing.¹⁵¹⁻¹⁵⁵

In England and Wales, the national rollout of the Neighbourhood Policing Programme in 2005 sought to provide a visible police presence to engage with communities and to tackle concerns through local problem solving.¹⁵⁶⁻¹⁵⁸ Police budget cuts following the 2008 financial crisis led to a significant reduction in neighbourhood policing.^{3,159}

The number of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) almost halved (16,918 to 8,750) between 2010 and 2022.¹⁶⁰ In 2019, the Government committed to recruiting an additional 20,000 police officers in England and Wales by the end of March 2023, as part of its 'Police Uplift Programme'.¹⁶¹ As of December 2022, 16,753 additional police officers have joined the service since April 2020.¹⁶²⁻¹⁶⁴

International evidence suggests that community policing has positive effects on public attitudes towards the police.^{113,114,165-168} Research also shows a positive [correlation](#) between police visibility and public confidence in the police.¹⁶⁹ In London, an analysis of data drawn from over 40,000 respondents to the MOPAC Public Attitude Survey between 2014-2017 showed that prior levels of perceived police activity (most notably visible patrolling presence) predicted trust in the police.¹⁷⁰ However, not all communities respond the same way to increases in visible policing.¹⁷⁰

Policy priorities

Stakeholders have identified several priorities for policymakers to consider, including improving:

- **Transparency and accountability.** In November 2022, HMICFRS recommended improvements to vetting processes and the way police assess and investigate allegations of misconduct.⁹² The specialist support service Women's Aid has called for "the full implementation of the inspectorate's recommendations on vetting, misconduct and misogyny in policing".¹⁷¹ In December 2022, the Institute for Government highlighted concerns around the lack of formal sanctioning powers for PCPs in their scrutiny of PCCs.¹⁰¹ Baroness Casey's review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the MPS called for the misconduct process in the MPS to be reformed and for new oversight and accountability mechanisms.¹⁷² In January 2023, the Home Office began a review into the process of police officer dismissals to "ensure that the public can be confident that those falling far short of the high standards expected of them can be removed from policing".¹⁷³
- **Police performance and culture.** A number of inquiries into police culture and the protection of women are ongoing, including: Operation Soteria Bluestone's investigation in response to the Government's End-to-End Rape Review,⁸⁰ and Part two of the Angiolini Inquiry to investigate police culture and concerns surrounding women's safety.¹⁷⁴ The Casey review called for "deep-seated" cultures to be tackled, for change in the MPS to be sustained.¹⁷² In relation to concerns over police performance in tackling fraud and economic crime, the Government has stated that a Fraud Strategy will be published shortly.¹⁷⁵
- **Police-public interactions.** Academics and independent think tanks have called for the principles of procedural justice to be followed during interactions between public and police,^{135,137,138,149} particularly with respect to the application of stop and search in Black communities.¹⁷⁶⁻¹⁷⁸ The Casey review concluded there was "institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia" in the MPS and called for a "fundamental reset" in the use of stop and search in London.¹⁷² The 2022 'Police Race Action Plan', developed jointly by the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing, recognises the "longstanding challenges" in the relationship between Black communities and the police and committed to carrying out an assessment of neighbourhood policing with respect to Black communities.¹⁷⁹
- **Police visibility, community engagement and local problem solving.** The Police Foundation's strategic review in 2022 called for police forces to deploy a significant proportion of recently recruited officers into community policing, with the aim of increasing trust and confidence in the police.³ The Public Accounts Committee 2022 report on the Police Uplift Programme recommended that the Home Office should by April 2023 develop a framework to evaluate the impact of the Programme, to demonstrate whether objectives to reduce crime and improve public confidence in policing have been achieved.¹⁸⁰ The Casey review called for "a new deal" for Londoners, to rebuild trust, confidence and consent.¹⁷²

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