



College of
Policing

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Recognising and responding to vulnerability related risks

Scope of practice guidelines

Version 2.1

Scope of practice guidelines

1. Guideline title

Recognising and responding to vulnerability related risk

2. Overall approach and intended audience

The College of Policing has recently adopted a new approach to developing practice guidelines that ensures they are grounded in evidence, are clear to understand and easy to apply in practice. This new approach ensures that guidelines are:

- based on the best available evidence,
- developed by independent and unbiased committees of experts,
- subject to stakeholder consultation allowing those affected by the guidelines to comment,
- quality-assured to ensure the process has been followed and guidelines are supported by evidence.

The guidelines will be developed and agreed by an independently-chaired committee, which will be made up of frontline practitioners, subject matter experts and academics with support from the College. The committee uses the best available evidence (empirical research and practitioner experience) which has been systematically collected and synthesised to agree what to recommend. The guidelines will set out a series of recommendations for practice and research and will be subject to consultation with stakeholders, practitioners and the public before being agreed and released by the College.

These vulnerability and risk guidelines will focus on:

1. **Recognition:** How to spot the signs of vulnerability¹,
2. **Responding:** How to create a safe, trusting environment to encourage the disclosure of risk/ harm and elicit the information required to inform appropriate actions to keep people safe,
3. **Support:** How forces can support frontline staff to recognise and respond to vulnerability within the scope of their duties as a police officer/ police staff.

¹ A person is vulnerable if, as a result of their situation or circumstances, they are unable to take care of or protect themselves or others from harm or exploitation. ([College definition](#))

This work will also explore the role of the police service and other agencies in responding to vulnerability related risk, and is primarily aimed at:

- Policing first responders² who are required to identify and protect vulnerable people in encounters in the line of duty,
- Specialists conducting secondary risk assessments, and
- Individuals who are responsible for supporting frontline staff and/or developing organisational policy and strategy related to vulnerability related risk.

This document sets out the background to, and scope of the practice guidelines. It describes what will and will not be considered in the guidelines and will remain in draft until it is agreed by the Guideline Committee.

3. Need for the guideline

Front line police officers and staff often come into contact with people in crisis, who have already suffered or are at risk of harm. These initial police interactions present crucial opportunities for protection. Responding to these opportunities requires the ability to recognise vulnerabilities and potential or actual risks of harm, maintain an open position of professional curiosity, understand one's own responsibility and know the most appropriate action to take.

In these situations, an officer's role is often to identify and deal with environmental features creating the immediate risk of harm, which can include arresting the suspect or facilitating the right support from other people or organisations. There may be differences in how different force contact centre staff and responding police officers best identify and respond to vulnerable people and this may impact the subsequent assessment and action taken. The core policing principles, as defined by the College of Policing, are: protecting life and property; preserving order; preventing the commission of offences, and bringing offenders to justice.³ In this context, the guidelines will focus predominantly on vulnerability in the context of protecting individuals from crime and harm.

Senior leaders should be aware of the risk assessment tools available to them and their officers and staff, and the evidence underpinning these. Officers and staff should have a good understanding of the common indications of vulnerability, which will support informed decision making.⁴ It is also important that the organisational processes supporting front line officers and staff are suitable and support individuals to make the most appropriate decisions in their work.

² Police officers or staff in initial encounter situations with members of the public, e.g. front line officers, front counter staff, and call handlers

³ <https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/operations/operational-planning/core-principles/>

⁴ Mclean, F. & Ryan S. (2018) "Vulnerability: A review of reviews - Summary of findings from reviews identified from a systematic research map", (unpublished)

Addressing the factors mentioned above will help improve the police service's response to vulnerability related risk. It is important to acknowledge, however, that policing activity occurs as part of a wider public and other sector response and this guideline will, therefore, explore how the role of the police service in responding to vulnerability related risk aligns with the capacity and capabilities of other responding agencies, possibly informing a wider strategic discussion on this issue.

It is anticipated that this work will sit alongside the College's Risk Principles⁵.

4. Context

4.1 Risk assessment tools

First responders can sometimes face difficulties identifying vulnerability during an encounter due to the wide range of risk factors and the complex relationship between risk factors.⁶ There are a number of different risk assessment tools which are tailored to different, specific areas of public protection, situations and/ or on an individual crime basis (e.g. DASH⁷, THOR⁸, ViST⁹). Response officers' work is often pressurised and is undertaken in busy environments, and research relating to domestic abuse has shown that practitioners often rely on a sub-set of factors when making decisions about risk.¹⁰ Observations of frontline officers found that some risk factors were sometimes overlooked, or not explored fully.¹¹ There was also evidence of inconsistent application and completion of risk assessments.¹²

There are also examples of risk assessment tools being used for different purposes. The THRIVE system¹³ is used in the control rooms in many forces, and is designed to allow the police to tailor the service they provide according to the particular needs of the victim, however Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) found some evidence of risk management tools being used primarily to manage demand, rather than to tailor their service to the needs of victims.¹⁴ Therefore, it is intended that this work focuses on the core policing purpose in identifying and managing risk in order to deliver effective policing in a more efficient way.

⁵ <https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/risk-2/risk/>

⁶ Robinson, A.L.; Myhill, A.; Wire, J.; Roberts, J. & Tilley, N. (2016) [Risk-led policing of domestic abuse and the DASH risk model](#), College of Policing

⁷ Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour Based Violence

⁸ Threat, Harm, Opportunity, Risk

⁹ Vulnerability Screening Tool

¹⁰ Robinson, et al. (2016)

¹¹ Robinson, et al. (2016)

¹² Robinson, et al. (2016)

¹³ The threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement decision-making model

¹⁴ [HMIC Police Effectiveness Vulnerability report 2015](#)

4.2 Increase in demand

Police-recorded crime has risen in the last few years, with increases in the reporting of specific crime types.¹⁵ For example, in the year to March 2018, compared with the previous year, there was a 24 per cent increase in police-recorded sexual offences, a 23 per cent increase in recorded domestic abuse offences¹⁶, continuing the upward trend seen since the year ending March 2017¹⁷ and a 36 per cent increase in the number of recorded cases of stalking and harassment¹⁸. The increase in these often complex crimes means officers and staff need to be better equipped to identify and assesses a range of risk factors in order to make informed decisions.

HMICFRS expressed concern that the “significant stress” some forces are under, stretches some forces to such an extent that they risk being unable to keep people safe and meeting the expected demand. Vulnerable victims may not be getting a prompt emergency response from the police, because the force has been overwhelmed by the scale of the demand it faces¹⁹. Police forces continue to face increasingly complex demands with reduced resources. For example, nationally, forces in England and Wales have experienced an 11% increase in the number of recorded 999 calls that are received, and crimes associated with vulnerability have also risen. Police forces are often seen as the service of last resort and have to deploy their resources where other shrinking public services (especially mental health services) fail to do so. Most forces are using some form of risk-based analysis to inform their allocation of resources, but some remain unable to allocate adequate resources to meet the needs of their demand models.

4.3 Inspection reports

Risk assessment and management

HMICFRS has raised issues of risk assessment and management consistently in national and individual force reports since at least 2014. Deficiencies in risk assessment featured in 7 national reports published in 2017, including those on stalking and harassment, modern slavery and human trafficking, children living with domestic abuse and police effectiveness. Risk assessment and management also came up consistently in interviews undertaken with 16 Chief Constables and in 28 focus groups with police officers and staff carried out in March 2018 as areas requiring improvement or more support. Risk assessment has appeared in the Independent Office for Police Conduct’s (previously IPCC) top 5 most common recommendation themes in each of the years 2015 to 2017, whilst protection of vulnerable

¹⁵ Ongoing efforts to improve recording practices since 2014 (in response to inspections by HMICFRS) have also contributed to this rise: [ONS Statistical Bulletin - Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2018](#)

¹⁶ [Policing for the Future 2018](#)

¹⁷ [ONS Statistical Bulletin - Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2018](#)

¹⁸ [ONS Statistical Bulletin – Crime in England and Wales: year ending June 2018](#)

¹⁹ PEEL: Police Effectiveness 2017, a national overview

people (which requires risk assessment and management) appears consistently in Policing and Crime Plans published by Police and Crime Commissioners.

Both HMICFRS and individuals within forces focus on issues relating to the effective identification and understanding of risk, particularly when dealing with complexity in terms of new types of crimes/ methods of committing crimes or understanding of complex behaviours, including mental health issues. Forces also seek support in managing the increase in risk and vulnerability they are identifying, in particular how they can make assessments and manage risk better in order to deal with vulnerability effectively but not make every case a priority. Conversely, HMICFRS is concerned about using risk assessment as a means of managing down demand.

Vulnerability

In 2015, a report from HMICFRS – PEEL: Police Effectiveness 2015 (vulnerability), a national overview²⁰ – recommended a consistent approach to defining vulnerability²¹ and to collecting data about the identification of vulnerable people²². PEEL: Police Effectiveness 2017²³, a national overview – identified that, three years later, forces continue to use several definitions of vulnerability: 12 make reference to a definition used by ACPO/ NPCC,²⁴ 11 use a definition provided by the College of Policing, 5 use the definition from the government’s Code of Practice for Victims of Crime,²⁵ 15 use their own definition or a combination of the definitions above and, 13 use a different definition of vulnerability to the one they used in 2016.²⁶ HMICFRS found that the proportion of recorded crime involving a vulnerable victim still varies between forces, and five forces were still unable to provide this data. In most forces, HMICFRS saw an improvement which was attributed to better training and support for frontline staff in dealing with vulnerable people. The report graded all 43 police forces on how effectively they supported victims and protected vulnerable individuals from harm. The majority of forces (23) were judged as ‘good’, 19 as ‘require improvement’ and 1 as ‘inadequate’. This is a significant improvement on figures from 2015 (12 good, 27 require improvement, 4 inadequate). However, despite these improvements, “protecting from harm those who are vulnerable, and supporting victims” was found to be the lowest performing criterion with more forces graded as ‘requiring improvement’ than anywhere else in the effectiveness inspection.

²⁰ [PEEL: Police Effectiveness 2015 \(vulnerability\), a national overview](#)

²¹ The report stated that there was a lack of consistency as to how vulnerability is defined which means that a victim who has been identified as vulnerable in one force may not be identified as vulnerable in another area, and could receive different level of service

²² The lack of consistency contributed to inconsistencies in the proportion of crime recorded as involving a vulnerable victim.

²³ [PEEL: Police Effectiveness 2017, a national overview](#)

²⁴ [ACPO Guidance on Safeguarding and Investigating the Abuse of Vulnerable Adults](#)

²⁵ [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime](#)

²⁶ [PEEL: Police Effectiveness 2017, a national overview](#)

4.4 The future of policing

The Policing Vision 2025, developed by the National Police Chiefs' Council, aims to deliver 'an improved understanding of vulnerability, both in physical and virtual locations, as a means of improving and differentiating service and protection'. The vision states that this may involve 'adapting the evidence of what works locally in targeting vulnerability and areas of high demand and need'.²⁷ Further, the Policing Vision suggests that by 2025 'the police service will have transformed the way it delivers its mission with a keen focus on prevention and vulnerability and the effective management of risk' with a focus on supporting people through wider reform enabled by systems and processes.

A prominent theme emerging throughout House of Commons Home Affairs Committee inquiry was 'the increasing volume of police work arising from identifying and managing various forms of vulnerability'.²⁸ The inquiry surmised that 'these trends were attributed to a multitude of factors, including growing awareness of various forms of vulnerability and the need to protect marginalised individuals from harm, a culture of risk aversion, and the impact of funding pressures experienced by other public services (some of which do not operate a 24/7 service), including local authorities and NHS mental health services'.

The Public Health Wales report (2017)²⁹, also identified several issues related to risk and vulnerability, specifically:

- There is varied capacity and opportunity across police workforces to effectively assess and respond to vulnerability. Evidence suggests that the assessment of risk is a continual process and officers use professional judgement, 'gut feeling' and experience when responding to vulnerability;
- There is a need for a shared understanding of vulnerability across services. Risk thresholds for intervention did not align across organisations, and that some agencies are more risk averse than others, which can cause tensions;
- A whole organisation approach is needed to responding to vulnerability, bringing together the various work streams into one coordinated and corporate approach under the direction of senior leadership.

5. The guideline

5.1 Development activity to date

The NPCC Violence and Public Protection Policy Board (VPPPB) was consulted in June 2018 during the development of the scope. The board gave views on options, including the

²⁷ [NPCC Policing Vision 2025](#)

²⁸ [Policing for the Future 2018](#)

²⁹ [Adverse Childhood Experiences: Breaking the Generational Cycle of Crime](#)

importance of having a clear evidence base and a guided approach to risk assessment which could be applied and used effectively irrespective of the nature of the incident.

Risk Management Authority (RMA) in Scotland routinely carries out assessments of risk models and has developed a 'Framework for Risk Assessment, Management and Evaluation' (FRAME) to enable 'proportionate, purposeful and defensible risk assessment and management practice'.³⁰ RMA Scotland were consulted with in order to identify the scope of their work and to ensure any work completed by the College would be complementary. The organisation confirmed that their frameworks were predominantly focused on offender risk assessments, and provided information about the methodology they use.

In order to begin to understand the evidence base of existing risk assessment tools, a call for information was sent out to an existing pool of interested parties – practitioners who had expressed interest in being involved in the development of guidelines. Further communications were sent out through the Police OnLine Knowledge Area (POLKA) and other internal College communications platforms. The call for information requested details of existing risk assessment tools (both primary and secondary) used by forces. Responses were collated to build a comprehensive list of existing tools available.

5.2 Focus of the guidelines

Part 1: Recognition: How to spot the signs of vulnerability

This part of the guideline is designed to support officers to recognise individuals at risk of harm.

1.1 A stocktake of existing risk assessment tools

Currently there is a plethora of tools available to the police for assessing risk. These tools typically focus on the:

- **crime type**, such as domestic abuse (Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment and Honour-based violence risk identification, assessment and management model (DASH))
- **individual**, such as adult male sexual offender (Active Risk Management System (ARMS))
- **situation**, such as attending roads incidents (dynamic risk assessments)
- **police process**, such as the annual strategic threat and risk assessment (STRA)

It is anticipated that very few of these tools have been properly evaluated and evidence suggests the tools are being adapted and applied inconsistently by users.³¹ For the frontline,

³⁰ <https://www.rma.scot/standards-guidelines/frame/>

³¹ Robinson, et al. (2016)

many of these tools are too cumbersome and/ or inappropriate and there is a need for an approach or philosophy that can be applied more universally.

The Risk Assessment Tools Evaluation Directory (RATED) provides agencies in Scotland with information about risk assessment methods and tools so that they can select them in a more robust and informed manner. Each tool is assessed according to the robustness of the evidence underpinning them.³² The criteria for selecting a tool include an assessment of how empirically grounded the tool is (i.e. its evidence base), how accurately the tool predicts the risks it is designed to measure (predictive validity), how applicable the tool is to different populations (e.g. females, BAMEs, and people with mental health issues) and whether the tool would have the same results if used repeatedly by different assessors (inter-rater-reliability).

This work will build on the RMA RATED tool, to produce a more comprehensive list that will expand the focus from perpetrators to include victims and focussing on the operational models which support the assessment of vulnerability. We anticipate this work will help forces make decisions about which tools they chose to use and encourage officers' professional curiosity to support them to make decisions based on informed choices for action through effective risk assessments.

1.2 Systematic evidence review refresh

The plethora of different tools available for different specific vulnerabilities makes it important to explore the feasibility of identifying a set of 'look fors' or 'signalling factors' that may apply to vulnerability in order to help frontline officers and staff make an informed initial assessment. An extensive trawl of the evidence on factors associated with increased vulnerability to a range of harms was carried out by the College in 2016.³³ The review was intended to help police practitioners better understand the vulnerabilities of all those they encounter, rather than thinking about risk in relation to individual forms of harm such as child abuse or domestic violence in isolation, and highlights issues that police officers and staff should be aware of during initial encounters.

We are proposing to build on the high level findings already obtained by refreshing this review, searching for systematic reviews or meta-analyses from January 2015 to present.

Both of these pieces of work *may* enable the development team to identify common signals, indicators or signs of vulnerability. By reviewing the most robust tools and distilling any common factors, together with the factors identified in the evidence review it may be possible to build guidelines that help officers to 'spot the signs' of vulnerability.

³² McIvor, G.; Kemshall H. & Levy, G. (2002) [A review of literature relating to the assessment and management of serious violent and sexual offenders, focusing on policy and legislation, risk assessment methods and risk management.](#)

³³ McLean, F. & Ryan, S. (2018)

Part 2: Responding – How to create a safe, trusting environment to encourage the disclosure of risk/harm and elicit the information required to inform appropriate actions to keep people safe

This part of the guideline focuses on:

- the interaction between the officer/ staff and the vulnerable person to ensure that opportunities for disclosure are maximised.
- actions carried out by partner organisations in identifying vulnerability/ harm and the approaches used to elicit information from individuals who may be reluctant to disclose abuse/ harm.
- actions that responders can take to keep people safe.

There will be two parts to this work.

2.1 Systematic evidence review

The evidence review will focus on identifying robust qualitative literature that explores the experiences and accounts of vulnerable victims with a particular focus on understanding what enables or inhibits a positive initial interaction and engagement during a police encounter. This will allow us to provide advice on communication styles and behaviours that may encourage vulnerable individuals to disclose abuse and provide detailed accounts that can support action to make victims/potential victims safer.

2.2 Practice evidence review

In addition to the review of the literature, fieldwork in forces and in other relevant sectors (including health, social work, probation etc.) will focus on understanding:

- how frontline practitioners identify vulnerable individuals and ask them to reflect on how they engage with individuals they suspect might be vulnerable in order to encourage disclosure of risk/ harm;
- explore how organisations support their frontline staff to identify vulnerability including what training and development they receive and what supervisory models or other management techniques/ structures they use;
- Identify the types of action that practitioners take to keep people safe – it is anticipated that these findings will be used to develop a 'menu' of options informed through practitioner experience.

The practice evidence may also begin to provide understanding of the police service role in demand management in the context of a wider sector response, exploring how the service can work in partnership with and be knowledgeable of, the responsibility of other statutory agencies.

It will be important to apply an element of rigour to this process in order, first, to draw out a broad range of practitioner views and experiences and, second, to identify the common principles that practitioners agree to be most important.

Part 3: Support - How forces can support frontline staff to recognise and respond to vulnerability

This part of the guideline will focus on how forces can support their frontline staff (including call centre staff) to successfully recognise and respond to vulnerability. HMICFRS reports will be used as a guide to conduct a series of small scale case studies in forces rated as outstanding/ good to identify factors and/ or CPD that enhance recognition and responses to vulnerability. Staff working in partner organisations, operating within a different frame of reference to policing, may identify a different set of cues or signals of vulnerability and/ or use different approaches to elicit information from vulnerable individuals who may be reluctant to engage. Practice evidence gathered from partners and other stakeholders in part 2.2 may, therefore, contain useful lessons to support force responses to vulnerable people.

6. Method

6.1 Rapid Evidence Assessments (REAs)

The research literature required to inform the guideline will be identified through a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA). REAs are reviews of the research literature that involve following clear procedures to search for, sift and bring together the findings of studies on a particular topic within the available timescales and resources. When developing the REA procedures, pragmatic decisions will need to be made to ensure the resulting literature is relevant, of an appropriate standard, and of a manageable volume. The use of transparent methods aims to ensure the reviews are relatively free from bias and can be easily repeated.

6.2 Practitioner expertise

To fully understand how forces deal with the issues of risk and vulnerability, stakeholders will be invited to share their expertise and information on current practices relevant to the focus of the guideline. This process will complement the REAs. Sharing practice will help the College to be aware of local research, evaluation or assessment work, enhancing the development of the evidenced-based guideline. Gathering practitioner expertise also helps to identify different force/ geographic/ sector approaches.

Where the social research evidence identified through the REAs is weak or not available, practitioners' experience and knowledge may be gathered and explored systematically to develop a more operationally-focused evidence base. The call for practice will run alongside the gathering of academic evidence so that the evidence can be considered in tandem.

Consensus-building exercises may be used to apply rigour to drawing out agreement from stakeholders as to what good practice looks like. It is a technique(s) often used to explore areas which have not got a strong or robust academic evidence-base. One option that has proven useful during the pilots is the 10KV interactive online system used in operational debriefing.

7. Related documents

7.1 College products

The College has published the following related pieces of Authorised Professional Practice:

- [Risk principles](#)
- [Mental Health](#)
- [Public Protection](#)

Other relevant College products include:

- [College of Policing one-day vulnerability training package](#)
- [College of Policing \(2016\) – Vulnerability conference](#)
- McLean, F. & Ryan, S. (2018) “Vulnerability: A review of reviews – Summary of findings from reviews identified from a systematic research map”, (unpublished)

7.2 Inspection reports

Risk identification of vulnerability has been the topic of a number of HMICFRS studies and reviews. The most recent include:

- [HMCPSP and HMIC \(2014\) Achieving best evidence in child sexual abuse cases – a joint inspection](#)
- [HMIC \(2015\) PEEL: Police effectiveness 2015 \(vulnerability\) - A national overview](#)
- [HMIC \(2015\) The welfare of vulnerable people in police custody](#)
- [HMIC \(2015\) Online and on the edge: Real risks in a virtual world. An inspection into how forces deal with the online sexual exploitation of children](#)
- [HMIC \(2015\) The depths of dishonour: Hidden voices and shameful crimes. An inspection of the police response to honour-based violence, forced marriage and female genital mutilation](#)
- [HMIC \(2015\) Witness for the prosecution: Identifying victim and witness vulnerability in criminal case files](#)
- [HMIC \(2016\) Missing children: who cares? The police response to missing and absent children](#)
- [HMIC \(March 2017\) PEEL: Police effectiveness 2016 – National Overview](#)
- [HMICFRS \(2017\) A progress report on the police response to domestic abuse](#)
- [HMICFRS \(2017\) Stolen freedom: the policing response to modern slavery and human trafficking](#)
- [HMIP, HMICFRS, CQC and Ofsted \(2017\) The multi-agency response to children living with domestic abuse. Prevent, protect and repair](#)
- [HMIC \(2017\) Living in fear – the police and CPS response to harassment and stalking. A joint inspection by HMIC and HMCPSP](#)
- [HMICFRS \(2017\) Hate crime scoping study. A review of the police response to inform future inspection activity](#)