

Researching Police: Subjects, Participants or Partner?

Room S0.11, Social Sciences Building, University of Warwick, CV4 7AL
8 May 2026

9.30-9.50 COFFEE

9.50-10.00 Welcome - Prof Jackie Hodgson & Prof Kim Wade, Co-Directors, COPR

10.00-11.15 A. Researching police elites and invisible spaces

Chair: Prof Jackie Hodgson (School of Law, Warwick)

Studying institutions unaccustomed to being studied: access, ambiguity and early career fieldwork

Emma Louis Blondes – London School of Economics and Political Science

Researching Masculinised Spaces: Ethics, Positionality, and the Gendering of Police Custody

Lexine Smyth – University of Sheffield

'An unfailing rapt audience' – researching a police elite: positionality and access

Clare Simkin – University of Portsmouth

11.15-11.30 COFFEE

11.30-12.45 B. Tackling internal police misconduct

Chair: Dr Hannah Marshall (Sociology, Warwick)

Selling workplace sexual safety

Ashley Perry – Anglia Ruskin University

Microaggressions and Intersectionality - The Police Staff Experience

Naomi Davis-Crane – Liverpool John Moores University

Outsider-Insider-Collaborator-Researcher: seeking virtue virtually

David Knowles – University of Portsmouth

12.45-1.30 LUNCH

1.30-2.20 C. Policing through the filmic lens

Chair: Dr Gabriele Pergola (Computer Science, Warwick)

Compliance and Discretion in Body-Worn Camera Activation: Interpreting Policy in Police Practice

Beatrice Rossano – King's College London

Visions of Policing: The Trajectory, Treachery, and Treatment of video

Terry S.H. Au-Yeung – Cardiff University

2:20-3:10 **D. Policing impacts on the policed**
Chair: Rebecca Plimmer (Psychology, Warwick)

Changing Faces of Policing: Austerity and the Symbolic Function of the Police in (Re)Shaping Ethnic Minority Social Identity
Tirza Sey – University of Warwick

It Goes Both Ways: Making Policing Research Mutually Beneficial
Bryony Hodgetts – Birmingham City University

3.10-3.25 **COFFEE & CAKE**

3.25-4:15 **E. Academic-Police partnerships**
Chair: Prof Kim Wade (Psychology, Warwick)

Police as Participants and Partners: Exploring Domestic Abuse, Suicide and Safeguarding
Eleanor Watson – University of Birmingham

The police as both partners and participants: Navigating the restrictions and complexities of partnership
Ioana Madalina Crivatu – University of Birmingham

4.30 Close and adjourn for drinks & networking for those wishing to stay

Researching Police: Subjects, Participants or Partner?

Abstracts

Session A. Researching police elites and invisible spaces

Studying institutions unaccustomed to being studied: access, ambiguity and early career fieldwork

Emma Louis Blondes – London School of Economics and Political Science

My doctoral research examines how French criminal justice actors navigate the ambiguity surrounding organised crime, drawing on 13 months of multi-site ethnographic fieldwork across elite police units, prosecutors' offices, examining magistrates' chambers and criminal courts. This paper reflects on my experience of negotiating and sustaining access to institutions with limited exposure to independent academic research. In this context, approaching access through formal hierarchies risked a single refusal foreclosing opportunities elsewhere. I instead approached departments individually, negotiating separate internship agreements (conventions de stage) with each. These agreements opened doors but generated tensions I could not fully resolve. They blurred the line between researcher and intern in ways that affected how participants understood my presence. Some assumed I was on a work placement; others drew on my research skills for support tasks, entangling me in the processes I was studying. Throughout, I had to navigate how to communicate my research aims to gatekeepers whose cooperation I depended on, in an institution where the presence of an outside researcher was unfamiliar. These dynamics pose challenges for early career researchers whose projects depend on fieldwork unfolding in settings they cannot anticipate, and who lack the institutional standing to counterbalance the power asymmetries involved. When the institution has limited experience of independent research and no established framework for accommodating it, the resulting vulnerability shapes the research in ways that warrant explicit reflection.

Researching Masculinised Spaces: Ethics, Positionality, and the Gendering of Police Custody

Lexine Smyth – University of Sheffield

Women make up roughly 16% of suspects held in police custody in England and Wales. However, despite police custody acting as an entry into the wider CJS, women's distinct experiences within such a highly masculinised space, remains significantly under-researched as little is understood about the gendered aspects of custody. This paper presents key findings from the STAR-funded 'Gendering Police Custody' project examining women's experiences of police custody in West Yorkshire which addresses this gap using extensive mixed-methods data. This includes interviews with 44 women with lived experience, 43 officers and practitioners, and 9 national stakeholders and 179 hours of police custody, out of court resolution and scrutiny panel observations, as well as a year of quantitative custody record data. The emerging findings thus far, some of which will be considered in this paper, include gender-informed consideration of: 'vulnerability', processes of criminalisation and diversion, police powers and suspects' rights, the pains of police detention, and the 'doing of gender' in custody for staff and women suspects. Beyond the empirical findings, this paper critically reflects on the methodological and ethical complexities inherent in researching "hidden" and highly controlled environments. We examine the ethical tensions of engaging with vulnerable

women in moments of crisis and the gatekeeping challenges involved in accessing and holding sensitive police data. Furthermore, the paper considers the researchers' positionality in navigating a heavily male-dominated and masculine police custody environment as an all-women team of researchers, and the emotional demand these complexities create.

'An unfailing rapt audience' – researching a police elite: positionality and access

Clare Simkin – University of Portsmouth

Accessing senior figures within policing, particularly chief officers, remains a challenge in criminological research. Despite the importance of understanding the culture, leadership styles and challenges facing chief officers, academic research on this elite has been comparatively sparse since Reiner's seminal work on chief constables in 1992. This presentation will explore the complexities of researching such an elite, how to gain access and how to gain their trust in the context of the researcher's own positionality as a (then) serving police staff chief officer. The presentation looks at the difficulties in interviewing individuals occupying high-ranking influential positions, where power dynamics, concerns about confidentiality and personal autonomy can create barriers to candid engagement. It also looks at the researcher's positionality - specifically their seniority and experience of working within the police service - intersects with these challenges. This presentation will consider why there are so few academic studies of chief officers in recent decades. In doing so, it underscores the importance of developing a nuanced understanding of power relations and gate keeping in elite research, ultimately contributing to a broader discourse on access in criminology and social research more generally.

Session B. Tackling internal police misconduct

Selling workplace sexual safety

Ashley Perry – Anglia Ruskin University

Workplace sexual safety remains a critical concern within policing organisations, where hierarchical structures, cultural norms, and operational pressures can inhibit reporting, disclosure, and cultural change. This presentation reflects on the process of developing and implementing a workplace sexual safety tool designed to support police forces in identifying risks, strengthening preventative practices, and fostering organisational cultures grounded in dignity and respect. Drawing on research experience and engagement with multiple UK police forces, this presentation examines the practical challenges encountered in communicating the purpose and value of the tool to officers and staff. These challenges include navigating scepticism around new initiatives, competing operational priorities, and the difficulty of framing sexual safety as an organisational responsibility rather than an individualised or reputational issue.

Microaggressions and Intersectionality - The Police Staff Experience

Naomi Davis-Crane – Liverpool John Moores University

Police staff comprise 34.8% of the police workforce in England and Wales (Home Office, 2026), fulfilling an extensive range of roles critical to the functioning of the criminal justice system. However, police staff also remain a substantially underrepresented group across multiple dimensions, including in terms of recognition, advancement opportunities, and role security.

The present research seeks to explore the experiences and sensemaking of police staff members in respect of law enforcement organisational and occupational cultures. With a view to developing recommendations for more inclusive and equitable policing organisations. The research comprised 34 semi-structured interviews with police-staff members from 24 different policing organisations in the United Kingdom. Thematic analysis of the resulting data yielding rich insight as to the complexities of the police staff experience. With key themes including the perpetuation of inequitable policies and processes in policing organisations which place police staff at a disadvantage, and the prevalence of microaggressions ingrained in language, behaviours and decisions, to the extent that perpetrators are unconscious to their damaging effect. Further, the research has identified complex intersectionality between being a member of police staff and female, and the existence of hierarchies of knowledge which downplay police staff expertise. Yet despite these challenges, public service motivation amongst police staff remains high.

This research makes a unique contribution to theory in surfacing the extent of culturally embedded inequity in policing organisations and the potential for intersectionality with gender discrimination. Whilst uniquely presenting practical recommendations for UK police forces to achieve greater inclusivity and cultural change.

Outsider-Insider-Collaborator-Researcher: seeking virtue virtually

David Knowles – University of Portsmouth

This presentation, 1.5 years into a 3.5 year ESRC funded PhD, reflects on the methodological, practical and collaborative challenges of researching police ethical decision making using immersive virtual reality (VR). The study explores how VR can support officers in developing the ethical judgement, confidence and personal courage required to intervene when witnessing sexual misconduct by colleagues. Following recent high profile misconduct cases, the project examines how innovative pedagogies might disrupt the social dynamics that sustain a damaging culture of silence. A mixed-methods research design combines data collected through VR participation, surveys, interviews and focus groups. Two VR scenarios created through force collaboration, simulate ethically complex workplace encounters, enabling officers to explore decision making in a psychologically safe yet realistic environment. Three cohorts: new recruits, student officers and experienced officers, allow comparison across stages of police socialisation. A central feature of the project has been the process of gaining access to a police organisation, negotiating gatekeepers, and building trust with participants. The researcher occupies an outsider-insider position, which has shaped scenario design, participant and staff engagement, and the interpretation of emerging findings. The presentation reflects on the practicalities of securing organisational support, navigating ethical sensitivities and managing the dual role of researcher and collaborator. It also considers the opportunities and constraints of collaborative police research, including organisational expectations and the realities of conducting innovative methodological research in a police setting.

Session C: Policing through the filmic lens

Compliance and Discretion in Body-Worn Camera Activation: Interpreting Policy in Police Practice

Beatrice Rossano – King's College London

This project forms part of ongoing doctoral research on officer compliance with body-worn camera policy through the qualitative study of a police force in England and Wales. The law often falls between two stools: in seeking effective regulation, it oscillates between precision and breadth. This tension is acute in policing, where policymakers must provide enough guidance to shape conduct without over-prescription that stifles the discretion officers need to respond to their work's unpredictable realities. Body-worn cameras enter this terrain as both a tool capable of increasing accountability and a challenge to discretion. Yet activation rules generally remain open-textured, unable to prescribe conduct for every encounter. Discretion therefore persists as, in most cases, officers ultimately decide when to record. Existing studies on body-worn camera compliance have largely treated compliance as a measurable question of whether officers follow the policy's letter. This doctoral research proposes to broaden the notion of compliance as accounting for both the interpretive and behavioural dimensions of rule-following. The policy's law sets out instructions on activation, deactivation, and data handling, but these should be read alongside the broader purposes and professional norms they are meant to serve. Gaps and ambiguities may arise from this duality. The project therefore asks how officers internalise and interpret body-worn camera policy in relation to hierarchical expectations. It also explores what contextual factors shape officers' decisions to activate cameras in practice. In doing so, the project situates compliance within wider socio-legal debates on how law in the books becomes law in action.

Visions of Policing: The Trajectory, Treachery, and Treatment of video

Terry S.H. Au-Yeung – Cardiff University

Does video speak for itself? From Rodney King to George Floyd to Reene Good, videos are presented in different contexts, by different actors, as indisputable evidence of "what happened". In the context of the proliferation of audio-visual recording technology and instantaneous sharing to globally distributed audiences and assembled moral communities, policing practice has gained a new visibility. Whether visibility provides for accountability is a highly contested matter. For example, citizens are frequently encouraged to 'see for themselves' in making projected moral judgements about the incidents. These judgements are, however, shaped by emergent 'new evidence', alternate angles and clips, and significant efforts by professional and citizen journalists, police, legal professionals, and politicians. In public fora, these re-tellings methodically represent, reconstruct, and recontextualise video 'evidence' to provide for the objectivation of the 'real' incident at hand. This presentation will report our research findings about the accounting practices of police violence through recontextualising them into the recent drastic events of law-enforcement violence against citizens. In conclusion, we contend that, despite its increased visibility, police practice remains a largely protected domain.

Session D: Policing impacts on the policed

Changing Faces of Policing: Austerity and the Symbolic Function of the Police in (Re)Shaping Ethnic Minority Social Identity

Tirza Sey – University of Warwick

Procedural justice theory argues that police–citizen interactions (re)produce social identity by shaping individuals' sense of inclusion or exclusion within legal institutions and wider society. While existing research shows how critical junctures can radically reconfigure the organisational nature of policing, less attention has been paid to how such transformations reshape the police's role as a prototypical representative of the state, and the implications this

has for the construction of individual social identity. Building on Loader's (1997) conceptualisation of police symbolic power, this paper examines the ramifications of being denied the ontological security that the police are presumed to confer, which provides individuals with a stable foundation for developing a coherent sense of self. It focuses on the austerity period (2010–2019), which advanced a 'tough on crime' agenda, reshaping the trajectory of policing in its symbolic function. It explores the impact of these changes on minority ethnic adolescents, who have historically had to construct alternative forms of social security and identity outside the traditional criminal justice system. Specifically, the paper investigates the long-term effects of these police (re)configurations on minority ethnic youth who encountered these evolving institutional authorities during formative stages of their lives (ages 10–23). Longitudinal data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is used to examine how cohort members' attitudes, values, and beliefs about themselves and the police evolved over this period. Logistic regression analyses assess these changes, while multi-group structural equation modelling (SEM) identifies whether different ethnic subgroups experienced varying levels of affiliation with the police.

It Goes Both Ways: Making Policing Research Mutually Beneficial

Bryony Hodgetts – Birmingham City University

This presentation outlines some of the initial difficulties which occurred during data collection for the PhD project titled 'Language, Incels and Policing: A Multi-disciplinary Approach to Incel-Inspired Violence', as well as how these were overcome. Misogynistic incel communities have received increasing academic and media attention in recent years, with incel ideology highlighted as fostering misogyny and anti-feminism (Ging, 2019; Sugiura, 2021; Heritage, 2023), and incel discourse regularly inciting and promoting violence as a legitimate response to the perceived injustices incels face (Witt, 2020; Baele et al., 2021; Zimmerman, 2022). Some individuals affiliated with incel ideology have also proceeded to perpetrate acts of offline violence, with some scholars characterising these as acts of misogynistic terrorism (Zimmerman et al., 2018; Lockyer et al., 2024). However, to date no research explores what awareness police in England and Wales have of these communities, or what training, policies, or procedures are in place to combat such threats. As such, this PhD addresses this gap, whilst also providing evidence-based recommendations to improve policing provision. This presentation will address issues experienced during initial data collection attempts for this project, as gathering survey data from police participants proved difficult. The potential reasons for this will be explored, before then outlining how establishing a mutually beneficial relationship boosted participant engagement. By providing training to police forces but requesting survey participation prior to attending, participant numbers almost tripled. Furthermore, police were receiving specialised training which benefitted their understanding, awareness, and ability to address incel-related issues within their roles.

Session E: Academic-Police partnerships

Police as Participants and Partners: Exploring Domestic Abuse, Suicide and Safeguarding Eleanor Watson – University of Birmingham

Since 2023, suicide has been the leading cause of death among domestic abuse-related fatalities. Evidence from the Domestic Homicide Project shows that nine in ten individuals who died by suicide following a recorded domestic abuse incident were already known to services. This exposes a significant safeguarding gap and highlights the need for coordinated action across research, policy, and operational policing. In response, the University of Birmingham

and the West Midlands Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner are delivering a co-produced PhD project examining suicide following domestic abuse and prevention strategies within policing, developed in partnership with West Midlands Police. Working inside an operational policing environment introduces distinctive methodological, ethical, and relational considerations. Police involvement spans multiple roles—from participants, to frontline collaborators, to strategic partners—which shapes access, decision-making, and expectations. These dynamics require clear governance structures, transparent communication, and ongoing negotiation of boundaries to ensure both academic integrity and operational relevance. The project also illustrates how research becomes embedded in frontline practice, what organisational conditions sustain collaboration, and how senior leaders assess value, alignment, and impact. This presentation brings together reflections from the PhD researcher and the Detective Sergeant and Detective Inspector who serve as the project's operational policing leads. Together, we explore how the partnership was initiated, maintained, and adapted over the course of the project, and reflect on the organisational and relational factors that enable constructive police–academic collaboration. The session offers practical insights for researchers and practitioners seeking to develop effective partnerships and considers how co-produced research can strengthen safeguarding responses and improve outcomes for victims.

The police as both partners and participants: Navigating the restrictions and complexities of partnership

Ioana Madalina Crivatu – University of Birmingham

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