The prevention officer: Understanding a 'new' breed of community police officer

A research project outlining the 'prevention officer' role and how it fits within contemporary policing.

Key details

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Police region	Yorkshire
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	September 2025
Date due for completion	March 2029

Research context

Historically, violent crime has been the responsibility of policing alone, but recent policy turns towards preventive, 'public health' approaches (Home Office, 2018) aim to redistribute this responsibility (Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act, 2022).

The policing response to this redistribution is embodied in the 'prevention officer'. Using procedural justice theory, this project will use ethnography to understand how this new role fits within the past and current policing landscape, and it will be used to examine policing's evolving identity in a time of 'permacrisis' (Bradford, Jackson & Taylor, 2024).

Prevention in UK policing is not a new idea, Peelian Principles established it as a primary role of policing (1948). There have been preventive initiatives such as problem-orientated policing (Bullock and others, 2007) and neighbourhood policing (Home Office, 2005). While those approaches were

independent police initiatives, this iteration is characterised by partnership, 'whole systems approaches' and early intervention.

This reflects a neoliberal policy agenda that aims to do more with less and new humility in police leadership that recognises that over-stretched policing must adapt to survive. Organisations and policies like Violence Reduction Units (Home Office, 2018) and the Serious Violence Duty (Home Office, 2022) may help to facilitate this adaptation.

The prevention officer is exemplified by 'navigators', as in West Midlands Police's community initiative to reduce violence and 'prevention officer' secondments to violence reduction units (Home Office, 2018). The prevention officer can be identified through their job description, focusing on early intervention with at-risk young people and liaising with other statutory services and community organisations to facilitate effective violence prevention. The role places little emphasis on enforcement activity.

Research methodology

The research design aims to involve a literature review and documentary analysis (for example, police job descriptions and role definitions) alongside semi-structured interviews with self-identified 'prevention officers' currently working in policing to define the 'prevention officer'.

Once defined, the project will use interpretivist epistemology and employ ethnographic enquiry in an inductive approach to study 'prevention officers' working on tertiary preventative interventions to reduce the impact and duration of violent offending by young people who have offended or who are identified as 'at-risk' of offending (Lab, 2019).

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with prevention officers as well as non-police staff and service users throughout the year-long fieldwork period. Police studied will be subjected to observations of their training, office environment, work with service users, and other aspects of their day-to-day roles.

Interviews with police officers will study their perceptions and experiences of the job role, motivations for applying, previous experience, perceptions of 'regular' policing, perceptions of service users, and procedural justice principles. Interviews with non-police staff will centre on their perceptions of and experiences with police in the intervention. Interviews with programme participants will study their interactions and perceptions of their assigned police officer throughout

their participation in the intervention.

Grounded theory following Glaser and Strauss (1967) will be used throughout the research, aiming to develop theory from the data collected in the ethnography, enabling flexibility throughout the research as new insights emerge. Police, non-police staff, and service users are to be recruited through theoretical sampling, recruiting participants based on their potential to contribute to the research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). As a result, the research will prioritise police induction.

Research participation

Police officers working in the capacity described above and involved in ongoing or potential interventions which would be operational between September 2026 and October 2027 are invited to contact the researcher.

References

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