

Institutional complexity and contestation in a local policing collaboration tackling exploitation

A case study of local multi-agency exploitation work, using institutional logics to explore the approaches of police and partners to their work, alignment and contestation.

Key details

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Police region	West Midlands
Collaboration and partnership	This project was supported by the College of Policing bursary scheme.
Level of research	PhD
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Research context

Policing in England and Wales is struggling to adapt to meet the modern challenges faced by our communities. Policing culture is often seen as part of the problem, contributing to an ongoing ‘permacrisis’. This case study of a local multi-agency partnership addressing exploitation adopts a critical realist philosophy to the entrenched perspectives of police and partners on the frontline of public services. Considering the national recognition of increasing workloads related to vulnerability and the need for more collaborative working arrangements, this case study offers insight into the institutional complexity of everyday multi-agency community safety work.

This case study uses thematic analysis of partners' interview data to identify three core institutional logics, revealing that tension exists within local police as much as between police and partners. A dominant cultural stance founded on the logics of managerialism and criminal justice is uncovered, underpinning sense-making and framing practices that prioritise efficiency through specialisation and simplistic victim-offender dichotomies.

The implicit theories and mental schemata within these logics impede meaningful system-wide efforts to protect some of society's most vulnerable. Further exploration indicates that an institutional tendency towards clarity, directness and simplicity underpins both logics, which hinders the capacity to address increasingly complex issues such as exploitation.

A strategic logic is also observed in use by officers and partners, which, based on a broader view of the police role in society, is equipped with a wider range of mental frameworks to understand complex problems. This naturally leads to valuing a greater variety of options and responses as part of an extended, systemic mental model of public protection. Being subordinate to the dominant logics in a centralised bureaucracy, its practice is hindered and thus its impact limited. Nevertheless, it holds promise as a model for policing to address the challenges of modernity better.

Research methodology

This study has five research objectives:

- review the literature on partnership work in neighbourhood policing to discover perspectives and theories relevant to collaboration in neighbourhood policing
- review the literature on institutional complexity to determine if concepts or theories are relevant to collaborative policing approaches to exploitation
- identify the core institutional logics used in the collaborative policing of exploitation in the case study and explore their utility to everyday police work
- describe any contestation between logics in the policing of exploitation, explaining their differences and enactment
- explore if the above findings illustrate how officers may understand and enact policework

This study adopts an institutionalist perspective, a cultural approach to organisational behaviour, contrasting with rational-choice and organisational efficiency-based theories. It treats institutions as

recognisable within society that possess their own unique culture, comprising values, symbols, routines and 'taken for granted' facts. Institutional logics serve as a meta-theoretical framework, representing 'ways of thinking' about the world, forming frames of reference that influence our activities.

The specific data collection method aims to capture the social reality of individuals and groups, and dialogue-based methods naturally support investigations of institutional logics. Semi-structured interviews form the basis of data collection: a sample of 19 authors' colleagues across police and partner organisations, representing various roles.

Reflexive thematic analysis is used to analyse the interview transcripts. Thematic analysis can be understood as generating 'ways of seeing', that is, making sense of the data, making it highly suitable for studies using the institutional logics approach. Reflexive thematic analysis emphasises reflexivity and interpretation, openly recognising the researcher's subjectivity, which is seen as a strength for the analysis and encourages the researcher to develop knowledge actively. This approach is particularly well-suited to maximising the positionality of an insider researcher.

Summary of findings

This project was completed in November 2025.

[Read report in National Police Library](#)

Research participation

19 staff working in a local partnership tackling exploitation: a mix of police officers and staff, local authority and third sector colleagues.