

What drives public distrust of the police in England & Wales, and why do negative attitudes form?

Public trust in the police has become an important area of criminological research because policing relies not only on formal legal power but also on public acceptance of police authority. (Bradford, 2026). Within the UK, policing has traditionally been understood through the principle of policing by consent, which means the ability of the police to exercise authority is closely connected to public approval, cooperation, and legitimacy (Office, 2012). The relationship between the police and the public is important, not only for the perception of individual officers but also for the effectiveness and legitimacy of policing (Hanway & Hambly, 2023)

Existing research has examined public attitudes towards the police through several related concepts, particularly trust, confidence, and legitimacy. Satisfaction and procedural justice. Although these concepts overlap, they represent different dimensions of the relationship between policing and the public (Bradford, 2026). Although these concepts overlap, they represent different dimensions of the relationship between policing and the public. Trust is concerned with expectations about how police will behave, including whether offenders are competent, honest and ethical, while confidence represents a broader assessment of policing as an institution (Hanway & Hambly, 2023). Legitimacy concerns whether members of the public regard police authority as appropriate and justified.

Understanding the difference between these concepts is important when examining public distrust. A person may have confidence that the police can respond to crime while questioning whether officers exercise their authority fairly (Owen-Evans & Law, 2024). Equally, an individual may distrust police practice without rejecting the legitimacy of the police. Recent research by (Bradford, et al., 2025) demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between trust, confidence and legitimacy when examining contemporary public attitudes towards policing.

The existing literature also indicates that public distrust is unlikely to result from a single factor. Instrumental explanations emphasise police effectiveness and the ability to control crime, whereas expressive explanations focus on the wider social meaning of policing, including fairness, community relationships and shared values (Bradford & Myhill, 2014). Procedural justice research similarly suggests that the way police exercise their authority can influence public trust and legitimacy (Henry, 2023). In addition, attitudes may develop through personal experience, victimisation, family and community influence, police visibility, media reporting and perception of police misconduct (Hanway & Hambly, 2023).

This literature review, therefore, adopts a thematic approach to examine the main factors identified in existing research that contribute to public trust and distrust in policing. It considers police effectiveness, procedural justice, personal experience, visibility, police misconduct, media influence and socio-demographic differences. The review then critically synthesises these themes to identify limitations in the existing evidence and to establish the rationale for further research into the factors contributing to negative attitudes towards the police in England and Wales.

Understanding Trust, Confidence and Legitimacy

A fundamental issue within the literature is the tendency to use terms such as trust, confidence and legitimacy interchangeably. Although these concepts are closely related, treating them as identical can make it difficult to determine precisely what members of the public are dissatisfied with when they report negative attitudes towards police.

Jackson et al. (2012) situate trust within the broader relationship between the police and the public, linking it to legitimacy and cooperation. Their work is significant because it moves beyond the assumption that trust represents whether people believe the police are effective. Instead, trust incorporates expectations about how police officers will behave and whether they can be relied upon to exercise their authority appropriately (Jackson, et al., 2012).

The distinction between trust and confidence is developed further by (Bradford & Myhill, 2014). They identify two broad explanations for public confidence in criminal justice institutions. The first is an instrumental explanation, whereby confidence is influenced by the perception of police effectiveness in preventing crime and reducing offending. The second is an expressive or effective explanation that focuses on the broader social meaning attached to the criminal justice institution. Their research provides support for the expressive explanations, suggesting that people assess police in relation to a wider perception of social order and community life rather than simply asking whether the police are effective at reducing crime (Bradford & Myhill, 2014)

This distinction is particularly relevant to the present research because the negative attitude towards policing may represent a different form of dissatisfaction. An individual may believe that the police are ineffective because crime is not adequately controlled, whilst others may believe the police officers are effective but exercise their powers unfairly. These two individuals could both report low confidence focus for two different reasons.

The Home Office review of research into public perceptions of policing reinforces this distinction. Hanway & Hambly (2023) found that confidence and trust were distinctive but

overlapping concepts. They describe confidence as generalised support for the police as an intuition, whilst trust relates more closely to perception of police integrity, ethical standards and competence. The review also indicates that factors such as police visibility, socio-demographic characteristics, and community engagement have influenced public perception (Hanway & Hambly, 2023).

More recent evidence strengthens the need to make these distinctions. Bradford & Weirich (2025) surveyed 1,484 adults across England, Scotland and Wales and examined several dimensions of public attitudes, including trust, confidence and legitimacy. The study demonstrates that these measures do not necessarily move together. Different characteristics of policing were associated with different attitudes, with police visibility particularly relevant to confidence and fairness, and probability particularly important to legitimacy (Bradford & Weirich, 2025)

This is an important development within the literature because early research sometimes relies on broader measures of trust and confidence. While such measures are useful for identifying population and level trends, they may conceal the specific reasons underlying public dissatisfaction. The distinction between these concepts, therefore, has methodological as well as theoretical importance. If researchers only asked whether the public trusts the police, they may fail to establish whether the distrust results from concerns about effectiveness, integrity, fairness or legitimacy.

Consequently, the lecture suggests that public distrust should be conceptualised as a multidimensional phenomenon (Schomaker, 2024). This provides a stronger basis for explaining the specific factors that contribute to negative perceptions of policing, rather than assuming that all forms of dissatisfaction represent the same attitudes.

Police effectiveness and public confidence

One of the most straightforward explanations for public confidence concerns people's belief that the police can perform their core functions. Instrumental theories suggest that the public's support for policing is partly dependent upon the perception of police effectiveness, particularly their ability to prevent and respond to crime (Bradford & Myhill, 2014).

From this perspective, dissatisfaction may develop when members of the public believe that police officers are not responding adequately to crime, antisocial behaviour, or community concerns. The public may judge police performance by whether officers attend incidents, investigate offences, protect victims, and maintain order. If these expectations are not met, confidence in the police can decline.

Bradford and Myhill's (2014) research is particularly important because it challenges the assumption that instrumental considerations are sufficient to explain public attitudes. Their analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales panel experiment found greater support for expressive explanations, suggesting that perceptions of social order and the broader role of criminal justice institutions are important to public confidence (Bradford & Myhill, 2014).

This creates an important tension within the literature. If confidence were determined primarily by police effectiveness, improving crime-control outcomes should consistently increase public trust. However, research suggests that people may continue to hold a negative perception even when they recognise the importance of policing effectiveness. This indicates that factors beyond simple performance influence public attitudes.

The perception of disorder further complicates the relationship between crime and confidence. Hanway & Hambly (2023) identify research suggesting that perception of antisocial behaviour and community cohesion may be more important predictors of confidence than concern about crime itself. People who perceive their neighbourhood as disorderly may have less positive attitudes towards the people, whereas those who perceive their community as cohesive and orderly may express greater confidence (Hanway & Hambly, 2023)

This suggests that the public evaluation of policing may be influenced by the condition of the community in which they live. A person who regularly experiences antisocial behaviour may judge police performance differently from someone living in an area where disorder is less visible. Therefore, public confidence cannot necessarily be separated from the social environment within which policing takes place

Police visibility is also closely connected to the perception of effectiveness. Sindall & Sturgis (2013) examined the relationships between police numbers, visibility and public confidence using administrative data linked to the British Crime Survey. Their findings indicate that both police numbers and perceived visibility are independently associated with confidence. Visibility has had a positive effect, whilst police numbers have had an additional direct effect and an indirect effect through visibility.

This research is particularly relevant in the context of changes to police resources. It may suggest that simply maintaining the number of officers allocated to frontline duties may not fully explain public confidence, because what matters to the public is also whether policing is experienced as visible and present with communities. However, the study's reliance on population, level survey data means that it cannot fully explain why visibility matters to individuals or how the quality of visible police encounters affects their attitudes.

More recent studies by Bradford & Weirich (2025) provide further evidence that visibility remains relevant. Their research found that perception of police presence was particularly

associated with confidence. This suggests that relationships between visibility and confidence have remained relevant despite sustainable changes in police and society.

Nevertheless, visibility should not automatically be equated with positive perceptions. Visible policing may provide reassurance when officers are presented as approachable and responsive, but increased encounters can create negative attitudes if individuals perceive them as intrusive or unfair. This demonstrates how instrumental and procedural explanations can overlap

Overall, the evidence suggests that police effectiveness is an important factor in public confidence, but it does not provide a complete explanation of distrust; instead, it indicates that members of the public evaluate not only what police achieve but also how they exercise authority.

Procedural justice and police legitimacy

Procedural justice provides one of the most influential explanations for the relationship between police behaviours, legitimacy and public trust. Procedural justice theory differs from purely instrumental approaches because it focuses on the fairness of decision-making processes and interactions between authorities and the members of the public.

Jackson et al. (2012) are particularly important in the British literature for examining the relationship between trust and legitimacy in England and Wales. Their work demonstrates that trust is influenced by perceptions of police behaviours and the manner in which officers exercise their authority. Where people perceive officers as fair, respectful and trustworthy, they are most likely to regard police authority as legitimate (Jackson, et al., 2012).

Procedural justice, therefore, suggests that the outcomes of police integration are not the only factor that determines whether it is perceived positively. Individuals may accept the decisions that are unfavourable to them if they believe the process was fair. Conversely, a favourable outcome may not produce trust if the individual believes that they were treated disrespectfully.

This is particularly relevant when considering negative attitudes towards policing. If a member of the public experiences an interaction in which they feel ignored, disrespected, stereotyped, or unfairly treated, the consequences may extend beyond this interaction with a particular officer. The experience may contribute to broader judgements about whether the police, as an institution, are trustworthy and legitimate.

The College of policing identifies 4 central components of procedural justice allowing individuals a voice, treating people with dignity and respect, demonstrating trustworthy motives, and making a neutral decision (Tansill, 2024). This framework provides a useful

practical interpretation of procedural justice and demonstrates how everyday police interaction can affect public perception (Tansill, 2024).

The relevance of procedural justice is particularly apparent in relation to stop and search. Stop and search gives officers significant discretionary powers and can therefore represent a particularly important interaction through which members of the public evaluate police fairness. College of Policing (2025) states that fair decision-making and respectful treatment during stop and search can influence whether individuals perceive police authority as legitimate (College Of Policing, 2025)

Murray et al. (2020) provide support for this argument through research involving young people in England and Scotland; their studies examine experiences of stop and search alongside trust, legitimacy and compliance with the law. They found that young people who experience greater levels of stop and search and perceived police treatment as less procedurally fair reported a negative attitude towards the police (Murray, et al., 2020). Their analysis also supported the applicability of procedural justice theory to young people within the UK.

The study is significant because it demonstrates that the police powers may have consequences extending beyond the immediate purpose of the encounter (Murray, et al., 2020). Stop and search may be justified as an important crime control tactic, particularly in relation to violence and weapons, yet the way in which the power is exercised can influence trust and legitimacy (Tansill, 2024).

Scrase (2020) provides a critical challenge to traditional procedural justice explanations. Whilst accepting the importance of perceiving fairness, he argues that the procedural justice theory does not fully explain the emotional process by which the experience of unfairness can develop into anti-police attitudes. Drawing on ethnographic research, he identifies feelings such as shame and anger as mechanisms that may help explain why individuals move from experiencing unfairness to active mistrust or confrontation with police authority.

This critique is valuable because it demonstrates that negative attitudes may involve emotional and identity-based responses rather than simple rational assessments of fairness. Individuals do not necessarily perceive police encounters as detached observers (Scrase, 2020). An encounter may affect their sense of dignity, identity or social position.

The procedural justice perspective is therefore powerful but should not be treated as a complete explanation of the public distrust. It provides strong evidence that fairness matters, but the literature suggests that fairness interacts with broader experiences of social identities and perceptions of police effectiveness.

Bradford & Weirich (2025) provide further evidence that procedural justice remains important within complementary British policing. Their findings indicate that perception of fairness and proportionality were particularly associated with legitimacy (Bradford & Weirich , 2025). This is significant because it demonstrates that procedural concerns remain relevant even when public attitudes are examined using more recent data.

However, the relationship between procedural justice and trust is not necessarily universal. Different groups may encounter policing in different ways, meaning perceptions of fairness may depend partly on previous experience, community context, and the particular police power exercised. Procedural justice should be understood as a major influence on public attitudes rather than a single explanation

Personal experience, victimisation and police contact

Personal experience represents another important factor in the development of public attitudes towards policing. Individuals who have interacted with police may evaluate their intuition differently from people whose perceptions are based primarily on indirect information.

Trust can be developed through expectations about future interactions. If individuals believe that police officers will treat them fairly and respond appropriately when assistance is required, they develop positive expectations of the police. A negative experience may undermine these expectations.

Sindall et al. (2016) provide evidence on how attitudes can develop even before extensive personal contact with the police. Their research examines more than 1,500 young people aged between 10 and 15 and their parents, using data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales. They found that a strong relationship between the attitudes of young people and their parents towards the police. This relationship was influenced by the perception of police visibility, victimisation and age (Sindall, et al., 2016)

These findings challenge an individualistic explanation of distress. If parents and social environments shape attitudes, individuals may inherit a perception of the police before developing substantial personal experience. Negative attitudes can therefore become socially reproduced.

However, the studies focus on young people, which limits the extent to which their findings can be generalised to adults. Parents may have a particular influence on adolescents, whereas adults are more likely to have accumulated a broader range of direct experience with policing and other criminal justice institutions.

The research nevertheless devastates the police visibility, and victimisation can affect how attitudes are formed. Individuals who experience crime may have a different expectation of the police, particularly if they believe that officers respond effectively or fail to provide adequate support.

This creates an important contradiction. Victimisation may increase contact with the police and therefore provides an opportunity for a positive engagement, but the dissatisfaction with the police response can also undermine trust. Consequently, simply having contact with the police does not necessarily produce greater confidence—the quality and outcomes of what contacts are likely to matter.

Therefore, the literature supports a distinction between contact with the police and a positive police contact. This is particularly relevant to procedural justice because an interaction that is frequently perceived as unfair may reinforce distrust rather than improve it.

Police visibility and community relationships

Police visibility is another recurring theme within the literature. Sindall & Sturgis (2013) found that perceptions of police visibility were positively associated with public confidence, suggesting that communities may judge police parties according to whether officers were perceived to be present and accessible.

The Home Office review similarly identifies police visibility and community engagement as a factor associated with police perception (Hanway & Hambly, 2023). This suggests that confidence is influenced not only by the former powers of the police but also by the extent to which policing is experienced within everyday community life.

Visible policing can have an important reassuring function. When people see officers in their local area, this may signal that the police are available and responding to community concerns. This is particularly relevant in areas experiencing antisocial behaviour or other visible forms of disorder.

However, the relationship between visibility and confidence is more complicated than simply increasing the number of officers seen in public. Police visibility can involve both positive and negative encounters. A person may perceive a neighbourhood officer as an approachable and reassuring figure, whilst others may associate a visible policing with stop and search or other enforcement activities.

This suggests that visibility is more likely to foster positive confidence when it is supported by effective community engagement and procedural fairness. (Schaap, 2021) examines the police building strategies across European policing contexts and argues that police organisations have

adopted different approaches to improve trust. Still, that research has historically paid relatively limited attention to what police organisations actually do to build trust.

This is an important limitation because much of the literature focuses on the factors associated with trust rather than on the practical mechanisms by which policing organisations can change these perceptions. Understanding whether trust can be actively built is therefore preferable to researching ways to improve police and public relationships.

Police Misconduct, Accountability, and International Trust.

Police behaviour, misconduct and accountability represent a significant influence on public perception. Trust depends partly upon the expectation that officers will exercise their powers lawfully and ethically. When police wrongdoing becomes visible, it may undermine confidence beyond the individual officer involved.

The College of Policing (2025) identifies police wrongdoing as particularly relevant to legitimacy. It reviews the evidence that suggests that a perception of excessive or unjustified use of force can erode trust and the testimony, whilst the perception that officers work within legal and professional standards can strengthen legitimacy (College Of Policing, 2025)

This suggests that public trust depends partly on perceptions of institutional integrity. Members of the public may judge the police not only by their own experience but also by whether the organisation appears capable of identifying and addressing wrongdoing.

Accountability is therefore particularly important. If a member of the public believes that police misconduct is ignored, concealed, or inadequately investigated, this may contribute to a perception that police officers are not subject to the same standards expected of other citizens.

Bradford & Jackson (2024) argue that declining trust has occurred alongside intense media, political, and social pressure on policing, including a series of high-profile incidents of police failure and malpractice. They caution against describing the situation as a complete crisis of trust, but argue that a decline in trust poses an important challenge to police by consent. They emphasise transparency, accountability and governance as important elements in responding to declining trust (Bradford & Jackson, 2024)

Bradford (2024) argues that changes in public trust over the last 25 years cannot be attributed to a single factor. Instead, changes reflect a wider political economy of trust, involving factors operating across policing and wider society (Bradford, 2024)

This is particularly significant for the president's research because it suggests that institutional trust can be affected by events occurring beyond individual policy and public encounters. High-

profile cases of police misconduct may become symbolic of a wider concern about police cultures, accountability or institutional competence.

The issue of accountability is particularly relevant to gendered perceptions of policing. Bradford (2024) identifies a policing of violence against women and girls, and high profile cases involving serving officers as a part of complementary contacts surrounding a decline in trust. These events may influence public perception because they raise questions not only about the individual's wrongdoing but also about whether the police organisation is adequately protecting victims and challenging inappropriate behaviour within its institutions.

However there is a danger in assuming that high profile cases automatically determine public attitudes. A national scandal may receive substantial media coverage that affects individuals differently depending on their existing beliefs, experiences, and political or community context. The relationship between misconduct and trust is therefore likely to be mediated by other factors. Nevertheless, the literature supports the conclusion that perceived police integrity and accountability are important components of institutional trust.