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Vulnerability, Welfare and Risk (BMPL6007)

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Police are just one part of a broader system responsible for protecting vulnerable people. Investigate if vulnerable people have enough support when they encounter exchanges with the police.

Police Officers are tasked with upholding laws, preserving public order, averting and probing crimes, ensuring community safety and responding to emergencies. One of the roles a Police Officer upholds and encounters within every day policing are supporting vulnerable people by responding to their needs, ensuring their safety and connecting them with appropriate resources and services. To understand how effective Police are when dealing with vulnerable people, it is important to investigate and assess various approaches, policies and training methods they undertake.

Under the Children Act 1989, It is the responsibility of the police to conduct inquiries to protect and ensure the welfare of any child within their jurisdiction experiencing significant harm (Beckett, et al., 2015). The term protecting vulnerable people (PVP) is used mainly by Police Officers and other Safeguarding agencies like Social Services, Education and Healthcare organisations to address the concerns regarding their well-being of a vulnerable child or adult (HMICFRS, 2023). Vulnerability arises when individuals find themselves in situations or circumstances where they lack the ability to protect themselves from harm, adverse impacts on their quality of life or exploitation (Police & Crime Commissioner, 2024). NPCC (2021) supports this by stating vulnerability occurs by personal and situational factors. Situational factors include Coercive Control, Poverty, Adverse Family Circumstances, Lack of Support and Isolation. Personal factors would include Age, Religion, Gender and Mental Health. The Equality Act 2010 protects the three characteristics of age, Disability and Gender, prohibiting discrimination, harassment and victimization, fostering a society that is more inclusive and equitable.

NSPCC (2022) identified how child cruelty offences saw a 25% increase between the year of 2021-2022, with a total of 26,000 children experiencing physical abuse, neglect and mistreatment within their home. A survey conducted by the Youth Endowment Fund (2023) had revealed that 47% of children had experienced being a victim in violence or had witnessed violence within the last 12 months. This indicates that child vulnerability continues to be an ongoing issue in contemporary policing. The role in which a Police Officer plays when dealing with vulnerable children is significant. A vulnerable child who has Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that experiences abuse, neglect or violence can be impacted for the remainder of their lives, leaving them with further issues in health, education and life experiences (CDC, 2023).

An approach in which Police Forces use when dealing with child vulnerability are collaborating and engaging with support services. Police Forces do this by forming partnerships with social services, mental health professionals and community organisations to deliver suitable assistance (Home Office, 2024). This is protected under Section 325 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 (CJA). Home Office (2024) highlights how efficient recognition of risks of challenges to vulnerable people and preventing the escalation of those risks relies on significantly on collaborative multi-agency efforts. Bridgend County Borough Council (2024) mentions how

the model of Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) is used by multi-agencies to enhance the potential for an elevated level of safeguarding by equipping all professionals with additional information to facilitate effective, more informed decision making. CSCP (2014) explains how there are two full time Police officers and researchers that are required to examine police databases, analysing recorded information, including data to identify patterns and relationships. This aims to facilitate early intervention by providing valuable insights. Police Officers are required to undertake a range of training methods such as child protection, computer-based training and training in confidentiality and information sharing.

According to Camden Safeguarding Children Board (2014) submitting a Merlin report is a prerequisite for conducting criteria check in MASH. Police Officers have the duty to review all Merlin Notifications every morning in relation to children. The Police Public Protection Desk (PPD) are responsible for checking whether any Merlin reports have a RAG status of Red and Amber, to prioritise and inform the screening officer of MASH, this is required to be assessed and passed by 9am. PPD officers conduct essential background checks on the adults mentioned in the Merlin reports. The information obtained encompasses any identified risks and concerns that might affect the safety and well-being of the child. MASH partners will verify their agency databases and transmit this information securely via email to the designated social worker. Once the information has been collected and analysed by the social worker, a summary is documented along with recommendation regarding the required level of need and action required. It is vital that PPD officers review the notifications regarding Merlin reports to ensure the process is dealt with as swiftly as possible. Priority is given to cases with a red status and information from MASH partners is anticipated to be accessible within a 4-hour timeframe (Camden Safeguarding Children Board, 2014).

HMICFRS (2022) had highlighted how the Police Force in England and Wales had failed to protect vulnerable children from Honour-based abuse, neglecting to recognise honour-based abuse as a simultaneous safeguarding concern and after reporting sexual abuse. Metropolitan Police (2024) states that Honour-based abuse constitutes a crime or incident carried out to safeguard or uphold the honour of a family or community. A super complaint was made by Tees Valley Inclusion Project who had concerns for failed and insufficient use of police resources (HMICFRS, 2022). College of Policing (2021) highlights how Chief Officers are urged to establish and encourage opportunities for officers and staff to improve their expertise and skills concerning vulnerability, to understand the connection between vulnerability and characteristics afforded protection whilst understanding various pathways for referring to other agencies such as Social Services. It can be questioned whether the PPD officers had followed the guidelines set out by College of Policing to understand how to support vulnerability and to utilize recourses effectively and correctly by using Merlin and MASH to update partner agencies who might have been more aware of Honour-based abuse, helping and supporting vulnerable children that were suffering. There are guidelines in place for Police Officers to identify and address the risks associated with vulnerability which have been set out by College of Policing (2021). These guidelines fall under four categories, Professional Development, Clues, Communications and Curiosity.

In order for Police Officers to understand the organisational focus, Chief Officers ought to oversee the handling of vulnerability by facilitating chances for staff to enhance their

expertise and capabilities in addressing the risks associated with Vulnerability. They should create and execute procedures that record, analyse and share pertinent organizational insights to improve practices, for instance, post-event analysis, recognising and addressing exhaustion related to compassion or empathy and examine the footage recorded on Body-word video (BWV) (College of Policing, 2021). The second category clues are explained by College of Policing (2021) which states that officers and staff are required to stay vigilant to recognise indicators signalling vulnerability. Effects of trauma, Coercion, sense of culpability the failure to acknowledge abuse are all clues to why a person may not reveal their vulnerability.

The IOPC (2021) report of Case 05, Issue 39 highlights where Police went wrong in supporting a vulnerable child in Child sexual abuse. Ms A had originally called the Police due to suspicion and allegation towards her sister's boyfriend Mr E, where she thought he had been sexually abusing her two nieces, Ms B who was 23 years old and Ms C 5 years old at the time of the call. Ms B had later come forward to clarify Ms A's suspicions, admitting to being sexual abused by Mr E since she was 13 years old. Ms B later decided to report the incident to the police, which led to no action on the behalf of the police. Ms B's auntie, Ms A had called the police to inquire about the status of the reported incident, expressing her concern for her niece's well-being and safety. Due to the complaint being issued an investigation took place with Officers who had dealt with the incident. It had been revealed that 13 years prior the complaint PC H had visited their home and made several notes based on Ms B's and Mr E's relationship along with notes on her taking an overdose around the same time messages were found sent to Mr E about getting an abortion (IOPC, 2021). It is clear the Police service failed to support and protect Ms B, who at the time, was a vulnerable child.

Police Officers neglected to document and share information with multiple agencies such as Social Services. They had neglected to assess the risks presented to all vulnerable individuals who were in contact with MR E, such as Ms C, the 5-year-old sister. This demonstrates the importance of communication and collaboration with multiple agencies. It shows how beneficial the guidelines set by College of Policing can be when dealing with incidents where vulnerable children are apparent. By using, Professional development, clues, communication and curiosity under the guidelines set by College of Policing, maybe PC H would have acknowledged that something was amiss when Ms B attempted to overdose after exchanging messages with Mr B about having an abortion. Police Officers had failed to understand and support a child who was vulnerable. Due to the failure of using guidelines and correct protocols, both children would go on to live with Adverse Childhood Experiences having a negative impact on their mental health and well-being.

The Police play a vital role in comprehensive response to trauma throughout an individual's life journey. Police Officers are situated effectively within communities, should be able to recognize children vulnerable to trauma and intervene, aiming to foster resilience and disrupt the generational cycle (Association of Directors of Public Health, 2021). The Association of Directors of public Health (2021) highlights that Police Officers need to have a trauma informed approach when dealing with those who are vulnerable. They need to be able to recognize the extensive effects of trauma and comprehend possible avenues for recovery. They should be capable of identifying the signs and symptoms of trauma in individuals and be

able to use practices, policies and procedures when dealing with trauma in vulnerable adults and children.

Communication is key when dealing with a vulnerable child, which is also highlighted under one of the categories in the guidelines set by College of Policing (2021). Effective listening, maintaining an open and respectful attitude, reducing or avoiding judgement and building a rapport are all key skills required to communicate effectively with a vulnerable person (College of Policing, 2021). Research supports this by confirming how vulnerable children for example those facing exploitation may hesitate to cooperate with Police Officers and the Justice System due to the fears of retaliation or apprehension of judgment by others (Ahern, et al., 2013). The research also states that Studies in both Laboratory and field settings highlight the significance of establishing rapport and providing emotional support during interviews with victims. It is evident that the communication skills emphasized in the College of Policing Guidelines benefit police officers to effectively establish a connection and foster a trusting relationship with a child who is vulnerable.

The minimum age for criminal responsibility is 10 years old (NSPCC, 2024). However, an increasing comprehension of the link between early adversity, trauma and the influence of sexual and criminal exploitation prompts enquires into the suitability of a criminal response for children who have experienced abuse (The Local Government Association, 2022). According to (Youth Justice Board, 2024) there were slightly below 8,400 children aged 10-17, entering the justice system for the first time within England and Wales. Although this was a small percentage increase of 1% from the previous year, it remains a concern to the number of children entering the system for the first time. One may question whether the initial involvement of children being first time entrants in the justice system are a repercussion of inadequate support and unsuccessful collaboration between multi- agencies, including the police.

The local Government Association (2022) confirms that diversion programmes led by the police, incorporating restorative actions, cautions and referrals to prevent arrests, have demonstrated a 20% reduction in re-offending rates. However, it also states how police should refrain from relying on cautions, court orders or convictions as mandatory criteria for intervening with vulnerable children who offend. It is inappropriate for a criminal justice response to be a prerequisite before children can access the necessary support. It also highlights how interaction with the criminal justice system typically elevates re-offending rates, hence caution is advised when employing police-led approaches to avoid escalating contact with communities engaged in offending. Police officer should be able to evaluate the child's needs and explore effective interventions at the first indication of aggressive, antisocial behaviour. It is evident that Police have the capability of reducing the number of children entering the Criminal Justice System. It can be seen that Police Officers have to power to reduce the number of vulnerable children from entering the Criminal Justice System, just by following the guidelines set out by College of Policing, by undertaking the correct training and being encouraged to progress their personal development in understanding signs of children who are vulnerable.

Public Health (2018) states that an individual with ACEs can elevate the likelihood of facing charges for a violent offence, serving a sentence in a young institute and evolving into a

prolific offender The report published by NSPCC (2023) shows the pattern of vulnerable children living with Adverse Childhood Experiences and how poor communication, training and understanding by police officers can result in them offending and continuing to reoffend. In the year 2021 an 18-year-old, David had been arrested for a murder offence. David was exposed to his mother's substance misuse before birth, and his early life was marked by unstable emotional connections and physical neglect. It is apparent that David is a child with ACEs. Subsequently, David became a target of criminal exploitation and engaged in drug dealing, resorting to cannabis use as a coping mechanism, which professionals were cognizant. NSPCC (2023) reported that David had later been arrested on three different occasions for the possession of a knife, robbery and the participation in drug distribution. It is evident that David's negative life experiences and trauma had a significant impact on his behaviour, which led him to the offence of murder and being incarcerated. This is supported by (Henderson, 2023) who states that individuals in incarceration exhibit higher rates of poor health, mental health issues and backgrounds of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Public Health (2018) also supports this by stating that children who undergo Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are more prone to adopting behaviours that harm health and display antisocial tendencies in adulthood.

The Vulnerability Assessment Framework, introduced by College of Policing (2021), enables police officers to identify vulnerabilities effectively. Appearance, behaviour, communication, danger and environmental circumstances are all factors within the framework which allows police to identify vulnerability. One of the apparent factors is appearance, this may encompass visible injuries, the condition of the child's clothing or body language. If an individual appears unsettled or anxious, law enforcement has the authority to conduct additional questioning, utilizing guidelines and knowledge gained from training to aid the individual who is vulnerable. The second factor within the framework is behaviour, this encompasses behaviours such as confrontational actions, denial, or the individual displaying emotions like anxiety, apprehension or shock (College of Policing, 2021). David's conduct serves as a prime illustration for this, where police officers would be able to identify his vulnerability due to his behaviour, demonstrating anger. By identifying David's vulnerability Police officers would have been able to support him by showing empathy and understanding, whilst communicating effectively with multi-agencies to ensure further support was given.

Equally important, communication is another factor provided in the Vulnerability Assessment Framework. Police officers would need to consider the rhythm of speech, the choice of words or language, vocal expression, while posing questions and engaging in attentive listening (College of policing, 2021). College of Policing (2021) highlights how Police Officers should assess their apparent capacity, whilst observing body language or any signs of distress or discomfort. It can be questionable as to whether identifying vulnerability through communication can be uncertain when dealing with younger children. It can be argued that identifying vulnerability through rhythm, vocal expression or choice of language becomes more challenging when dealing with a child who has not developed speech yet.

Considering danger within the framework is essential. Police officers must assess if the individual is facing imminent danger (College of Policing, 2021). Under Section 46 of the Children Act 1989, Police have to the right to place a child under police protection for 72 hours if they believe they are in immediate danger. According to Citizens advice (2021) It is

mandatory for the police to exchange information with local authority, social services, schools and health services. Police must actively seek and seize evidence related to the offence, if there is any. Under Section 19 of The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 allows police officers to seize anything if they have reasonable grounds for believing it is related in a criminal offence, preventing it from being concealed, lost, altered, damaged or destroyed. Consideration must be given to the environment of the vulnerable child, examining their role models and assessing whether there are cause for concerns (College of policing, 2021). The Vulnerability Assessment Framework highlights the knowledge provided to police officers, ensuring they comprehend and are aware of the factors that render a child vulnerable.

It can be concluded that there are well-defined approaches, strategies, laws and guidelines in place for police officers to support vulnerable individuals, specifically children. Police have the duty to conduct inquiries and provide support to safeguard and ensure the well-being of any child, which is stated under the Children Act 1989. It is evident that additional challenges in health, education and life experiences stem from vulnerable children with Adverse Childhood Experiences (CDC, 2023), which increases the chances of the child to facing charges for a violent offence and developing a pattern of prolific offending (Public Health, 2018). The case of David reinforces this perspective as it shows how a vulnerable child who has Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) can have a significant negative impact on their life when not given the full support and guidance needed at the early stages of identifying the vulnerability within the child. Although there are clear well-defined approaches, strategies, laws and guidelines in place for police officers to follow, it can be questioned whether Chief Officers are advocating the training as well as they should be. The inability to support Ms B by sharing crucial information and collaborating with multi agencies indicates a deficiency in knowledge and training demonstrated by Police officers who had been involved. As a police officer, supporting a child who is vulnerable is vital, with the correct training, knowledge and tools used, police have the capability of protecting vulnerable children from harm, reducing the risk of ACEs and increasing the likelihood of them leading a content and typical life.

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