

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Contemporary issues in Policing

Literature Review - In support of your presentation, you are required to submit a 2500-word critical review of the literature around your subject area. The literature review should aim to summarise, interpret, and critically evaluate published material to establish current knowledge of the subject.
BMPO7006

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Public Trust and Legitimacy in UK Policing

Introduction:

Maintaining legitimacy and public confidence is one of the most significant strategic challenges for UK policing, as declining trust can undermine the effectiveness of policing institutions (Bradford & Jackson, 2024). Police officers are an essential part of the social fabric of communities they serve, but without the trust and confidence of the public, the police would be seriously limited in their ability to do their job (Murphy et al., 2014). Legitimacy refers to the belief that authorities, institutions, and social arrangements are appropriate, proper and just (Tyler, 2006). Procedural justice is defined by treating people with respect and dignity, making decisions in fair, transparent and accountable ways, and allowing people a voice (Jackson et al., 2012). Research also demonstrates that, when interacting with the police, the public considers their approachability, helpfulness and fairness as crucial to building public confidence and legitimacy (Bradford et al., 2009).

Police achieve trust by acting fairly, taking the interests of the public into account and by communicating and engaging effectively (Bradford & Jackson, 2010). Research on reassurance policing demonstrates that visible policing patrols can reduce fear of crime and increase public confidence (Skogan, 2009). However, procedural justice theory argues that it is not simply police presence, but the quality of interactions, particularly fairness, respect and voice that shapes perceptions of legitimacy (Tyler, 2006). Tyler goes on to argue that while police presence may increase public confidence, procedurally just treatment strengthens perception of legitimacy and the belief that the police should be obeyed, promoting greater public cooperation and

compliance. Research by Tyler & Huo (2002) also found that individuals are more likely to comply with the rules when they perceive the police as fair, just and respectful in their treatment of the public. However, trust is dynamic and can be enhanced or undermined by events or processes, including incompetence, incivility, or malpractice (Hohl et al., 2013).

In recent years, UK policing has experienced sustained scrutiny regarding its legitimacy, shaped by concerns over misconduct, institutional discrimination, and weaknesses in accountability mechanisms. High-profile cases involving police wrongdoing, alongside critical inspections of organisational culture, have reinforced perceptions that misconduct is not always effectively governed or sanctioned (Casey, 2023). For example, in March 2021, a serving police officer murdered Sarah Everard in London, which sparked public outrage and intensified scrutiny of police conduct (Lowerson, 2022). The case raised profound concerns about institutional accountability given the perpetrator was a serving officer, entrusted with public protection. According to Goldsmith (2005) procedural injustice, through police actions or failures to act, can negatively impact upon public trust, including negligence, ineptitude, discrimination, intimidation, and excessive force. Essentially, people lose trust when they see the police behaving in ways they think are unfair or unjust. Without public trust and perceived legitimacy, policing by consent becomes difficult to sustain, undermining cooperation and weakening public safety (Jackson et al., 2012).

Literature Review:

Confidence is described as representing generalised support for police as an institution (Jackson & Bradford, 2010), whereas trust relates more specifically to perceptions of police integrity, fairness and conforming to ethical standards (Tyler & Huo, 2002). Perceptions around police visibility and how informed people feel have been linked to judgements of effectiveness, fairness, and community engagement (Bradford et al., 2009). Police community engagement has been associated with judgements of police effectiveness; Merry et al., (2012) found that participants who believed they could influence police decisions in their area had higher confidence levels. Police visibility has also been shown to influence trust in police fairness (Yesberg et al., 2023). Furthermore, higher levels of trust and confidence in the police is proven to contribute to greater social cohesion (Jackson & Bradford, 2010). These experiences of procedurally just treatment, strengthen trust and enhance police legitimacy, encouraging cooperation and compliance (Tyler, 2006). Perceptions of police effectiveness in tackling crime and maintaining order also contribute to confidence, although evidence suggests these instrumental concerns are less influential than fairness in shaping legitimacy (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

Trust and legitimacy in the police is fragile, and can be strengthened or undermined given it is continuously produced through everyday encounters. Isolated experiences of unfair treatment can disproportionately damage trust and willingness to comply with police authority (Tyler, 2006). Minority ethnic groups, particularly Black communities consistently report lower levels of trust, largely due to disproportionate exposure to over-bearing policing practices such as stop and search and perceptions of

discrimination linked to feelings of exclusion and unfair treatment (Bradford, 2014). Age is also a key factor, with older people reporting higher levels of trust and confidence in the police, while younger individuals tend to express lower levels of trust (Hough, 2012). Gender differences in confidence in the police are also evident, although are less pronounced than other demographic factors. Evidence suggests that women tend to support slightly lower levels of confidence than men, particularly in London, where policing responses have been subject to criticism (Pickering et al, 2024). Taken together, these factors illustrate a legitimacy strain that is not uniform across all communities or contexts, but is concentrated among groups with more frequent, or adverse police contact, aligning with procedural justice research on the centrality of fairness and trust in sustaining police authority (Tyler, 2006).

High profile failures and perceived inadequacies in tackling discrimination can undermine trust and weaken perceptions of police legitimacy (Bradford & Jackson, 2010). Bradford et al (2014) demonstrated that trust in the police declines when they are perceived as failing to protect vulnerable groups, and when experiences of perceived injustice undermine their legitimacy. This is significant in the context of policing by consent because sustained legitimacy and public confidence are essential for voluntary compliance (Tyler, 2006). Where these perceptions are negative, the legitimacy required for policing by consent is weakened, reducing cooperation and undermining effective policing outcomes (Jackson et al., 2012). Research suggests that these variations are strongly influenced by procedural justice experiences and wider structural inequalities, which can either reinforce or erode trust over time (Bradford & Jackson, 2010; Bradford et al., 2014).

Legitimacy, trust, and policing by consent:

The dominant framework for understanding police legitimacy is procedural justice theory (Tyler, 2006). The literature strongly supports the view that procedural justice is the primary driver of public trust and confidence in policing, with perceptions of fairness, respect and voice during interactions shaping legitimacy more than instrumental assessments of police effectiveness (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). While procedural justice theory emphasises fairness and respectful treatment as the primary driver of legitimacy, there is also substantial evidence that perceptions of police effectiveness and crime control play an important role in shaping public trust and confidence (Bradford & Jackson, 2010). When the police are seen as effective in reducing crime and maintaining order, this can enhance public satisfaction and strengthen confidence in policing (Skogan, 2009). Similarly, Hough et al., (2010) found that perceptions of police ability to tackle crime contribute significantly to confidence in police institutions. Tankebe (2013) also argues that legitimacy is partially performance based, meaning that effective crime performance and feelings of safety can reinforce public willingness to cooperate with the police.

However, although police effectiveness and crime control are important, research suggests that how police exercise their authority is more significant for shaping public trust and legitimacy than outcomes alone (Jackson et al., 2012). Tyler (2006) demonstrates that individuals are more likely to accept decisions and comply with the law when they have been treated with dignity and fairness, even when outcomes are unfavourable. Bradford et al (2014) also demonstrated that perceptions of fairness are stronger than predictors of both trust in the police and compliance with the law than

instrumental concerns such as crime reduction or effectiveness. This body of work challenges traditional performance-based models of policing suggesting that legitimacy is socially constructed through everyday interactions between police and the public. Loader and Mulvey (2003) go on to argue that trust in policing is shaped not only by individual encounters but also by institutional narratives, media representation, and historical relationships between police and different communities.

Culture, Ethics, and Institutional Failure - The Casey Review:

The Baroness Casey Review (2023) was commissioned in response to a series of high-profile scandals in the Metropolitan (Met) Police Service that raised serious concerns about racism, misogyny, and homophobia. The review documents systemic issues within the Met, including failures in internal accountability and experiences of biased or disrespectful treatment, which it identified as key drivers of declining legitimacy. Importantly, it emphasised that legitimacy is not only about how the police interact with the public but also how they operate internally. By highlighting systemic failures in vetting, training, and misconduct processes, it underscores how internal organisational practices can undermine public trust. This reflects the argument made by Bradford et al (2014) that legitimacy is shaped not only by external interactions but also by internal standards and accountability mechanisms. The Casey Review provides contemporary empirical support for procedural justice theory, demonstrating how perceived injustice and discrimination weaken the social foundations upon which legitimate authority depends (Tyler & Huo, 2002).

The Casey Review confronts uncomfortable truths on the moral and ethical standards of policing by documenting patterns of discrimination, misconduct, and organisational failure within the Met. The review moves beyond performance metrics and instead frames legitimacy as a multi-dimensional construct shaped by fairness, accountability and inclusion (Casey, 2023) reinforcing the idea that policing must be evaluated not only on what it achieves, but on how justly it operates. Casey emphasised that “too many Londoners, particularly Black Londoners, do not trust the police because of their experiences” (Casey, 2023, p8). This statement reflects the reviews broader argument that trust and legitimacy are shaped directly through encounters with policing, particularly among marginalised communities who are more likely to report negative encounters and perceive unfair treatment which in turn undermines confidence (Bradford et al, 2014). However, the review’s primary focus on the Metropolitan Police raises questions about generalisability to other forces. And although the review provides a detailed diagnosis of institutional failures, it offers limited guidance on implementation, leaving policy makers to determine how it’s recommendations should be translated into operational practice.

Managerial and Performance- Based Approaches - The Barber Review of Policing:

Sir Michael Barber’s Strategic Review of Policing in England and Wales (2022) adopts a strategic perspective, emphasising the need for policing to adapt to emerging challenges such as cybercrime, technological change and increasing public expectations. The review places policing reform within a broader systems-thinking approach, arguing that future legitimacy and effectiveness will depend on the services

capacity to modernise operationally and technologically (Barber, 2022). The review advocates for a more data-driven, efficient, and responsive policing model. From this perspective, legitimacy is understood to be an outcome of effective service delivery, and it assumes that better performance will lead to increased trust and cooperation. This reflects a traditional instrumental or performance-based model of legitimacy, in which public confidence is achieved from visible success in outcomes, responsiveness and efficiency (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

However, this assumption is challenged in the procedural justice literature, which argues that legitimacy is shaped more strongly by perceptions of fairness, neutrality, and respectful treatment than by instrumental outcomes such as effectiveness (Tyler, 2006). Bradford et al. (2014) found that trust and cooperation with the police are more closely linked to procedural justice judgements than to perceptions of crime reduction performance. However, while improved effectiveness may contribute to trust and legitimacy, it cannot sustain it. Similarly, whilst procedural justice may lead to increased trust, if police cannot solve crime or keep the public safe, public trust and confidence will suffer. Arguably, perceptions of police effectiveness play a significant role with both procedural justice and performance shaping confidence and cooperation (Bradford & Jackson, 2010). The Barber Review does not address the deeper organisational changes required to rebuild trust, nor does it specifically address issues of fairness, discrimination, or misconduct, all of which are central to police legitimacy challenges (Casey, 2023; Hohl et al., 2013).

Structural Reform and Centralisation - The UK Policing White Paper:

The UK Government's Policing White Paper (2026) represents one of the most ambitious attempts to reform policing in recent times. The White Paper is driven by concerns about fragmentation and inconsistency across police forces, it proposes increased national coordination, greater use of technology and improved central oversight. By standardising practices and strengthening central co-ordination, it aims to improve efficiency and effectiveness (UK Government, 2026). However, policing by consent is said to be founded on strong locally formed relationships between police and the communities they serve (Loader, 2006). The centralisation of policing powers has been criticised for weakening local accountability and responsiveness, thereby reducing opportunities for meaningful community engagement (Jones & Newburn, 2002). Consequently, shifting authority to national institutions risks undermining these relationships and, in turn, weakening public trust and confidence. Furthermore, increased government oversight raises concerns about political interference. Recent police reforms have intensified these concerns, with evidence suggesting that greater political direction may place pressure on chief officers and risk undermining impartial policing (Shannon, 2020).

Critically, the Government's policing reform agenda fails to engage with the structural and cultural issues identified in the Casey Review (Casey, 2023). Academic research suggests that structural reforms alone are insufficient to address entrenched organisational cultures, which are resistant to change and reproduced through everyday practices (Loftus, 2009). Without meaningful efforts to transform police culture and address systemic inequalities, structural reforms are unlikely to produce

sustainable improvements in police legitimacy, as trust is shaped less by formal institutional arrangements and more by everyday practices, values, and perceptions of fairness (Tyler, 2006; Bradford, 2014). Therefore, reform may produce a more efficient police system, but not a more legitimate one and risks leaving the core issue of policing by consent unresolved (Reiner, 2010).

Conclusion

Despite numerous reviews of UK Policing including the Casey Review (2023), the Barber's Review (2022) and the UK Government's White Paper (2026), efforts to reform police culture and restore legitimacy continue to face structural and cultural barriers. The UK Government's reform agenda, aims to address perceived shortcomings through stronger performance frameworks, clearer standards, and enhanced accountability. However, while such measures may improve oversight and consistency, they are unlikely to succeed without deeper cultural transformation and frontline behaviour change, which are proven to be inherently slow and resistant to top-down intervention (Loader & Mulchay, 2003). Improving police trust, confidence and legitimacy requires a sustained commitment to procedural justice, alongside effective policing outcomes, and is dependent on wider institutional reform that addresses organisational culture and accountability structures (Bradford & Jackson, 2010; Bradford et al., 2014). High profile misconduct cases, reinforce public perceptions of systemic failure, thereby eroding trust faster than reforms can rebuild it (HMICFRS, 2022). Without engaging with these deeper sources of distrust, efforts to improve policing risk remaining superficial and neglect to restore 'policing by consent' on which effective policing ultimately depends (Reiner, 2010).

I acknowledge the use of ChatGBT on the 30th and 1st April 2026 to support my research using the following prompts:

Please provide me with key academic literature on police trust, confidence, and legitimacy in the UK

Please provide me with materials on the Casey Review, Barber Review and 2026 Government White Paper on Policing

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work. I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

I acknowledge the use of Copilot on the 19th and 20th April 2026 to check my references using the prompts:

Please check against UWTSD Harvard Referencing style

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

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