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Injury Prevention

Published: 01/11/2018

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

Ford, K., Roderick, J., Evans, J., Newbury, A., Bezczky, Z., Hughes, K., & Bellis, M. (2018). The police response to vulnerability and risk: a public health approach to policing. *Injury Prevention*, 24(suppl 2), A42.

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THE POLICE RESPONSE TO VULNERABILITY AND RISK: A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH TO POLICING

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Preventing and mitigating the life-long harms associated with childhood adversity is a clear international priority. Many organisations are striving for long-term, sustainable solutions to improve the wellbeing of populations. As International trends for crime decline and demand related to vulnerability (i.e. child maltreatment and domestic violence) increases, it is essential that the police respond using an early intervention approach to break intergenerational cycles of violence.

The research aimed to understand the current system for the response to vulnerability by a police force in Wales, UK. Objectives included understanding police perceptions on their ability to respond to vulnerability and identifying the current protocols for the management of vulnerability by the police and associated agencies.

In October 2016 - January 2017, mixed methods research was conducted with a police force in Wales. Over 370 hours of operational policing was observed, 27 interviews and seven focus groups were conducted with police staff. Police safeguarding referral data for a 12-month period was also analysed to ascertain the scale of vulnerability.

The police encounter high levels of vulnerability related demand, with over 60,000 safeguarding referrals submitted in a 12-month period. Staff held diverse levels of understanding on vulnerability and the effects of childhood adversity or trauma. A varied capacity and opportunity to assess and respond to vulnerability was also reported. Challenges included cross-organisational working, highlighting the need for a shared understanding across services.

Traditional policing methods, training and systems need to adopt to this scale and type of demand. A range of recommendations have been developed to ensure policing can be more effective in preventing problems before they escalate. Policy implications include how police are trained, ensuring they respond to vulnerable individuals in a trauma-informed way. Implications of the findings for partnership working will be examined.

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