

A new tactic of state violence

Policing exacerbates a crisis of harm

There is a crisis of harm in society. We do not have an equitable distribution of the foundational things we all need to survive and thrive such as safe and comfortable housing, access to holistic healthcare, nourishing food, education, rest and leisure time among our communities, and the ability to enjoy stewardship of the natural environment. The proposed solutions to harm in our society that the state provides, such as police and prisons, obscure the reality of the crisis we face. The criminal-legal system and policing which funnels people into that system picks off racialised and marginalised communities for further state violence. This process does nothing to address the vast structures of inequality that provide contexts for lived realities of harm and exploitation.

Modern policing is presented by the state as a supposed salve to this crisis of harm. In particular, we are told that the police are a critical line of defence against gender-based violence. Last year, the Home Secretary Yvette Cooper announced the Labour government's plan to halve 'violence against women and girls' (VAWG) in the next decade by pouring funding into a "expert-led, practical police response"¹ in order to "take back our streets"². Concerningly, the methods currently used by police to pinpoint 'risky' or 'dangerous' locations or individuals are founded in discrimination and biases that are only exacerbated by increased police activity and new technologies, such as 'predictive policing' which claims to optimise police 'intelligence'. As Dr Patrick Williams notes in Amnesty's *Automated Racism* report, "rather than 'predictive' policing, it's simply, 'predictable' policing. [It] will always drive against those who are already marginalised".³

In part, the government plans to implement its strategic vision through legislation. The proposed Crime and Policing Bill seeks to simultaneously bolster police powers and public confidence in the police; to increase police presence in public spaces, and to lay out stricter vetting standards for police forces. It also plans to create new roles and partnerships within policing, such as placing domestic abuse specialists in 999 control rooms and funding specialist rape teams within police forces. These promises build upon the Labour party's 2024 manifesto, which also pledged to fast-track rape cases in order to remedy low prosecution rates; to introduce a new criminal offence for spiking, and to make prison sentences in GBV cases harsher. This portfolio of proposals outlines the

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Home Office, Jess Phillips MP and The Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP (2024, September) *New measures set out to combat violence against women and girls*.

² Prime Minister's Office (2024, July) *The King's Speech 2024*.

³ Amnesty International (2025, February) *Automated Racism*. Page 43.

driving belief behind the government's plan to halve VAWG: that increased police presence and better-resourced police activity makes people safer.

Alongside the government's focus on police presence as a line of defence against GBV, new "counter-terror style data analysis and tactics" will be employed to "relentlessly target"⁴ the 1000 "most dangerous abusers and sex offenders who pose a risk to women"⁵. Not only should we be particularly concerned about the use of 'counter-terror style' tactics given the well-documented harms of counter-terror 'pre-crime interventions' such as Prevent⁶, but we can also surmise that identifying the "1000 most dangerous abusers" among a population of 68m people is a fairly tokenistic exercise which will leave the socio-economic contexts, institutions, and behavioural norms and attitudes that facilitate abuse unchanged. This approach suggests, without evidence to support such a thesis, that there is something pathological about these 1000 individuals which binds them together as a collective force for bad. Furthermore, the base data used to identify these 1000 individuals is already riddled with the discriminatory bias that guides policing: this data will be over-representative of particular communities, groups, and criminalised workforces who are the primary targets of police surveillance and harassment in general.⁷

This approach attempts to atomise harm in society down to isolated 'deviant individuals', when we should instead seek to identify, remedy and transform the root causes of harm, including through strengthening communities of care, making the oppressive institutions and structures which produce violence obsolete. The criminal legal system requires the drawing of clear binaries between 'victim' and 'perpetrator' in order to cleanly apportion blame for harm to single individuals, overlooking collective and institutional failures that lead to harm. Predictive policing taps into the deep colonial fundamentals of policing—the need to categorise and control people based on the resources available to us; where and how we spend time; who we associate with; the way we generate income, and the subsequent ways in which we are able to deal with the trials of life. These categorisations lead to less-resourced individuals and communities being held accountable for the crisis of harm we find ourselves in, while individuals, groups, and corporations outside of the police's crosshairs continue to act with impunity.

⁴ Home Office and The Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP (2024, September) *Top perpetrators of VAWG targeted under new national strategy*.

⁵ Labour party (2023, October) *Labour announce new perpetrator programme to target 1000 most dangerous abusers and sex offenders who pose a risk to women* [press release]

⁶ Amnesty UK (2024, July) *The Prevent duty and its chilling effect on human rights*.
amnesty.org.uk/prevent

⁷ Amnesty International (2025, February) *Automated Racism*. Page 42.

Abolitionist feminist perspectives⁸ assist us to unravel the idea that there are certain individuals or groups who are wholly ‘perpetrators’ and others who are perfect ‘victims’. This unravelling leads us to an awareness that we can all *do harm* and *be harmed* by each other within a landscape of capitalist violence⁹, where confected resource scarcity tries to keep us scared, divided, and precarious: the ideal conditions for harm. The liberation offered through transformative justice processes—which we will return to in more detail—that both name and reckon with harm while also addressing root causes and attempting to meet everybody’s basic needs are essential.

The expansion of carceral feminism

Predictable, racist policing, even when employed in the pursuit of tackling GBV, is still predictable, racist policing. So-called innovative and tech-driven policing is just another way to get more funding into an institution that is inherently harmful. We know that new policing technologies are not benign, and have been used to try and stifle feminist, anti-racist and abolitionist struggles for justice and liberation, such as the deployment of live facial recognition cameras by police at protests, the retraumatising use of invasive digital strip-searching to mine data from rape survivors’ phones, and the proposed use of algorithms mentioned above to ‘predict’ incidents of GBV. These ‘innovations’ steamroll decades of feminist learning and problem-solving which locate the solutions to violence within strong, and resourced communities of care—not communities who are harassed, surveilled, brutalised and perpetually split apart by policing and incarceration.

As Privacy International wrote in their 2019 feminist manifesto:

“if we are going to talk about smashing patriarchy and dismantling systems of oppression (as we should!), we need to understand the role of surveillance and data exploitation in perpetuating and enhancing those systems [...] Surveillance and data exploitation are about categorisation. They are about putting individuals in boxes, tagging them so they become easier to process.”

In spite of this reality, a criminal-legal approach that prioritises ‘robust’ policing and prison sentences as a solution to gender-based violence (GBV) is not only set out by the state, but widely supported by the web of support services for survivors of violence that make up the UK’s GBV ‘sector’. Since the 1980s, the GBV sector has steadily increased its support for and complicity in the criminal-legal ‘solutions’ to harm in society. In the late

⁸ Abolitionist Futures remind us that abolition is “a political vision and a practical project for building collective safety and wellbeing for all without relying on punishment, violence, and oppression”. An abolitionist feminist approach takes as its starting point a commitment to collectively growing care, justice and healing through the rejection and dismantling of carceral systems and logics.

⁹ Blakeley, G. (2021, March 17) *The System of Capitalism Has Always Been Built on Violence*. Jacobin.

2000s, the American sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein coined the term ‘carceral feminism’ to describe the formation of unlikely political alliances between faith groups, activist groups, and human rights initiatives who were embarking on a ‘feminist’ crusade to criminalise sex work, while ignoring the needs and lived realities of sex workers. Likewise, in the UK, key voices in the mainstream GBV sector join hands with the state to make the case for tougher prison sentences, investment in policing, and the further criminalisation of many forms of GBV—perpetuating and expanding cycles and webs of harm without seeking to transform the conditions that lead to harm in the first place.

The 1980s provided a pivotal point for the evolution of carceral feminism: examining this backdrop helps us to understand why GBV practitioners arrive at a place where they would support the expansion of police powers and technologies. The dawn of neoliberalism ushered in a socio-economic and political philosophy during this decade that would heavily steer global economic systems in the direction of prioritising profit over people. The primacy of the individual was exalted while community networks were deprioritised and unions brought to their knees; public services and infrastructure were privatised and social housing was sold off. Governments attempted to eschew their responsibility to provide welfare support, while a moral responsibility was placed on charities and voluntary organisations to step in and plug the gaps. For GBV sector organisations in 1980’s Britain, an environment was created where instead of collaborating with their sister organisations, they entered into competition over tenders where ‘value for money’ was prioritised over delivering impactful support services.

It is from within this landscape that criminal legal responses to harm have been prioritised over more transformative modes of justice and healing. Central to this mentality is the idea of ‘risk’. In a world characterised by ongoing threats of economic and environmental catastrophe; constant instability (for example, in relation to work, housing, and health), and the individual being held responsible for and crucially *blamed for* our own material conditions, the assessment and management of danger and ‘risk’ becomes a vital tool of control and governance. This mentality bleeds directly into GBV work, with the development of frameworks like Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs). MARACs are chaired by police officers and use matrices to supposedly predict the risk of future harm, but in reality, end up sacrificing the agency and needs of the survivor at the altar of the state’s desire for a precise, contained, and definitive single victim and perpetrator. As Camille Kumar, managing director of Abortion Support Network and former-GBV sector worker comments, “MARACs, for many survivors replicate the power and control dynamics that they are seeking to escape”¹⁰. ‘Solutions’ to GBV that are

¹⁰ Wilson, A. (2013, July 22) *Racism, surveillance, and managing gender violence in the UK*. openDemocracy.

undergirded by a desire to predict and manage harm and ‘risk’ through the narrow lens of individual blame and punishment will largely enact more harm.

Innovation in the hands of a violent institution

Despite the stories and the scandals, policing continues relatively unchanged and Governments of all stripes have made the case for more bobbies on the beat; more technological innovations and data-driven policing, and more funding for new partnerships and specialist teams to tackle GBV. However, ramping up police contact does not increase safety or improve the welfare of people facing harm or in crisis, and often police interventions lead to further violence including fatalities and immigration enforcement action. Research by *Huck* found that just under half of deaths in or following police custody involved people with “known mental health concerns”¹¹, and a 2023 report by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner found that all 43 police forces in England and Wales have shared information about survivors of domestic abuse with immigration enforcement in the past three years¹². Police contact poses a series of risks, not safeguards, for people who are also experiencing other forms of structural abandonment and state violence—whether through, for example, the border regime which facilitates domestic violence, worker exploitation, sexual harassment, and coercive control among other forms of abuse, or through inadequate resourcing and provision of mental healthcare. The proposition that more and ‘better’ policing will directly correlate to less harm in society does not hold in the face of this evidence.

We must consider the coercive, unaccountable power of the police as we ask ourselves: whose hands are wielding these new policing technologies? The government’s proposal to outline stricter vetting standards for new recruits to the force alongside ramping up an ‘expert-led, practical police response’ is a direct response to increasing public distrust of the police, which have been found to harbour “institutional racism, sexism and homophobia”¹³. In particular, the very forms of harm which the police believe they can root out with data-driven tactics are prevalent, and carried out with relative impunity among its own officers: data published in 2023 revealed that over 1,500 police officers had been accused of violent offences against women and girls over a period of six months, and less than 1% had been sacked¹⁴.

¹¹ Frazer-Carroll, M. (2021, September 6) *We must honour the lives lost at the hands of police*. Huck.

¹² Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2023) *Safety Before Status - how to ensure the Victims and Prisoners Bill meets the needs of all victims*.

¹³ Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB (2023, March) *Final Report An independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service*.

¹⁴ National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) (2023, March) *First violence against women and girls benchmark published*.

More specifically, the suggestion that more scrupulous hiring processes will weed out the violent 'lone wolves' is likely a response to the Angiolini Inquiry into the murder of Sarah Everard by police officer Wayne Couzens. The Inquiry turned to a tired trope—that of the 'bad apple' police officer; one which exhibited some red flags that were regrettably missed during and after recruitment. Responding to the inquiry, Sarah's parents acknowledged a key detail overlooked by the inquiry—that of the inherently coercive nature of policing. The family stated: "We believe that Sarah died because he was a police officer – she would never have got into a stranger's car"¹⁵. No amount of vetting or careful recruiting can reduce the potential for harm to be caused by members of an institution who rely upon coercive terror to do their jobs, and can themselves carry out acts of harm and violence (such as serial sex offending, in the case of Couzens), without any consequences. Given that the police themselves present, not sporadically and exceptionally but *institutionally* an unaccountable source of gendered harm, we cannot trust that the police will also log and capture their own behaviours in hotspot-mapping and other risk 'prediction' systems. These systems will continue to shield officers from accountability for GBV—whether, for example, enacting state-sanctioned violence during strip-searches or when harassing and arresting sex workers, or when carrying out acts of GBV which are classified as 'criminal offences' such as rape and murder.

Beyond predictable violence: defund, abolish, build

Abolitionist groups who are working to reduce harm through strengthening and resourcing communities instead of the criminal-legal system point to the fact that current policing and criminal-legal methods for addressing GBV are largely ineffective. Forms of GBV that are recognised as criminal offences such as domestic abuse and rape are endemic and rarely prevented by police or prosecuted by the courts. Furthermore, the government's narrow definition of GBV overlooks the gendered violence of capitalist corporate greed, state-enforced poverty through welfare caps, cuts and sanctions and the No Recourse to Public Funds immigration condition, and routine exploitation of workers which largely runs unchecked and unpunished. It also overlooks the mass gendered violence which characterises the imperialism of wars, invasions and occupations which successive governments have either participated in or failed to challenge. Furthermore, it conveniently doesn't account for the high levels of GBV found within police forces, as well as the inherent coercive violence of policing. We can conclude that the law does not really task the police with reducing harm in society. In order to reduce harm in society, police powers and technologies will need to be restricted and stripped back, not expanded. It is for this reason that abolitionists say: defund, abolish, now.

¹⁵ Guardian staff (2014, February 29) 'Sarah died because he was a police officer': Everard family statement in full. Guardian.

Abolitionist scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore tells us that in order to move towards genuine safety and support, we must build 'life-affirming institutions'¹⁶. Meaningful harm reduction requires actively remedying the root causes of violence, and developing caring frameworks of prevention, not ploughing more resource into 'predictable policing'. The difference here is significant: 'predictable policing' uses discriminatory data to justify the targeting and harassment of racialised and marginalised communities. This approach doesn't seek to prevent harm from happening—it enacts further harm by reinforcing inequality and sweeping people into the criminal justice system. Conversely, meaningful prevention work seeks to understand why harm happens, and to disarm and improve the circumstances that lead to harm. This involves deep relational work within our communities, and skilling ourselves up so that we are better equipped to intervene at the early stages where harm is unfolding—to be active bystanders, to intervene in each others' lives, relationships and kinship networks of all kinds where we see disrespect, neglect, or any form of poor treatment emerging.

Prevention work also involves collective action to improve the material and structural conditions that provide fertile sites for harm: low quality and unstable housing; precarious, exploitative and in some cases criminalised work; inadequate provision of or access to health and social care; a punitive and poorly-functioning benefits system, and the hostile environment and racist border regime which produces vulnerability and exploitation, among others. These conditions drive people into poverty, cycles of distress and disruption, and law-breaking for survival, which also places them directly in the crosshairs of the police—enacting further violence.

Part of this work to improve material and structural conditions requires us to grow and share our skills and community resources. As Cradle Community write in *Brick by Brick: how we build a world without prisons*:

“We have already developed an abundance of skills for community accountability simply through our experiences of surviving in the world. Each of us has skills we can bring to our communities; some of us can offer care work, some of us organise to tear down carceral institutions, some of us have financial resources to redistribute, and some of us are good at crafting useful things with power tools. The important point is that we all have a role to play within our community, and it is only when we come together with the mindset that no one is disposable that we can envision our collective liberation.”

Cradle Community points to some of the ways we can use our resources to reduce harm: opening up our homes to each other, sharing the labour of social reproduction, and

¹⁶ Davis AY, Dent G, Meiners ER, et al. (2022) *Abolition. Feminism. Now*. London: Penguin Books.

chipping away at the punitive and carceral institutions and systems which make our lives untenable. A resource developed by Abolitionist Futures also sets out non-carceral approaches to addressing GBV, such as violence de-escalation skills training, non-police-based crisis intervention teams, prevention-focused education, and mutual aid and community support¹⁷. Lawyer, writer and trans activist Dean Spade explains that mutual aid is not just a process by which we can meet each others' material needs, but is a vital site of struggle where we recognise that, "the people in crisis are not to blame for the crisis"¹⁸. This approach poses a direct confrontation to policing, which focuses on identifying an individual person to blame for the 'cause' of violence or disturbance, so that they can be extracted from their community and punished, leaving the structures and contexts of harm untouched.

An overarching approach to addressing GBV which focuses on prevention alongside meaningful, long-term change and healing is that of transformative justice. Transformative justice is a practice developed by racialised, indigenous and marginalised communities living at the sharp edge of systemic oppression who prioritise harm-reduction and healing frameworks that honour their experiences and visions for justice. Crucially, when considering issues of GBV, transformative justice emphasises the need for accountability and consequences for acts of harm, while also rejecting the forms of punitive vengeance that dominate criminal-legal systems and perpetuate cycles of harm. Transformative justice is an approach that requires us to name violence, to recognise harm done, and to take steps not only to heal those directly involved, but to make changes at a societal level to try and prevent the recurrence of that same harm. Sometimes this involves the use of community mediators to help people navigate conflict. We can also use community-led tools such as pod-mapping—a method developed by the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective—to help us identify who we can turn to for support when harm happens, whether we are survivors, bystanders or people who have done harm.

Policing and the criminal-legal system is not able to, and was never designed to engage in these nuanced, difficult, deeply relational, loving and compassionate forms of community care and support. Given that the initial purpose of police forces was to quash working-class unrest and protect the status quo of 'wealth for the wealthy', it is no surprise that new methods and technologies of policing simply work to reinforce inequality. When a narrowly-defined understanding of GBV is leveraged as a driving reason for rolling out new policing 'technologies' that entrench further harm and violence, it is evidence that these institutions and their methods are not dedicated to our safety and liberation. When the state claims to be addressing 'women's safety', while in the same breath capping and

¹⁷ Abolitionist Futures (2024) *Addressing Gender-Based Violence - Carceral Reforms vs Abolitionist strategies*. abolitionistfutures.com/gender-based-violence

¹⁸ S. Luce (2021, March 15) *Mutual aid, Abolition and Movements: An Interview with Dean Spade*. Portside.

sanctioning benefits, blocking access to public funds and services, and raiding women's workplaces and enacting deportations, among other violent acts, we cannot rationally believe that safety is a true priority. We must consider the carceral logics and harmful consequences of 'predictive policing' and call it by its name: yet another tactic of state violence that we must urgently halt and dismantle.

Written by Leah Cowan for Amnesty International UK in 2025. The views expressed in this essay are the author's own and not necessarily those of Amnesty International UK.