

OPINION:

Improving police training in spectrum management can increase trust and reduce harm



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An arrest earlier this month of an autistic 16-year-old girl by officers in West Yorkshire for a suspected ‘homophobic public order offence’ received widespread attention after her mother posted a video of the incident; University of Hull Policing Degree Programme Director and former officer Mike McKue, and Senior Lecturer in Criminology Dr Meron Wondemaghen, believe more police training in understanding and responding to

neurodiversity can improve trust in policing and reduce harm.

Earlier this month, footage of the arrest of a 16-year-old autistic girl by West Yorkshire Police was circulated widely in the UK and internationally, once again raising concerns both about potential over-reach by the police, and the impact of such events on public trust and confidence in policing.

According to [a statement by the force](#), officers attended Leeds city centre at around 1am after receiving calls from a family member of the girl “who was reportedly intoxicated and putting herself at risk”.

The officers took the girl home, but once there she was arrested “on suspicion of a homophobic public order offence”; a [three-minute video](#) of the arrest, filmed by the girl’s mother and later uploaded to TikTok, suggested that the apparent homophobic slur was a comment by the youngster that a female police officer “looked like her lesbian nana”.

With seven officers on the scene, the video shows two of them in the hallway of the home as the girl appears in distress, sitting in a corner next to a cupboard and hitting herself; she is later taken away screaming.

West Yorkshire Police Assistant Chief Constable Oz Khan challenged the footage as only providing “a very limited snapshot of the circumstances of this incident”, and added that the force “takes its responsibilities around the welfare of young people taken into custody and around neurodiversity very seriously”.

Preventing harm?

In a subsequent statement three days after the incident, the force said that having reviewed the evidence the youngster would face no further action, and that West Yorkshire Police’s Professional Standards Directorate was reviewing the circumstances after receiving a complaint.

“Without pre-empting the outcome of the ongoing review we would like to reassure people that we will take on board any lessons to be learned from this incident,” added ACC Khan. “We do appreciate the understandable sensitivities around incidents involving young people and

neurodiversity and we are genuinely committed to developing how we respond to these often very challenging situations.”

However, once again at this stage it is puzzling to see what was abusive or harmful in this case and, [as my colleague has recently commented](#), what harm police were actually trying to prevent.

As noted in that article, it is increasingly the concern that – be it a 16-year-old autistic minor, a 15-year-old minor taken from the middle of an exam to be strip-searched after being wrongfully suspected of cannabis possession, or a mother with a distressed child arrested after being wrongfully suspected of bus fare evasion – it is the police who are causing harm to various vulnerable populations.

[PACE code G](#) gives statutory powers to arrest provided it is used fairly, responsibly and with respect (s.1.1), and is justified and proportionate having considered less intrusive means (s.1.3); we would suggest that nothing in this guidance was employed in this latest case.

Essential skills

Let’s go back to basics: what skills do you need to be a good police officer? Immediately, the following come to mind: good verbal communication, the ability to listen to diverse populations, resilience, patience, and most of all, common sense. This raises questions about whether the current training is fit for purpose.

Modern policing is as challenging now as it has ever been, especially with the range and variety of incidents that police have to deal with; I can confidently say that some of the training I received as a police officer was poor.

On a number of occasions, the best way to get training across was via the managed learning environment (MLE) platform, created by the College of Policing; this is not an ideal situation when you are dealing with members of the community you serve, while trying to remember what a document or video advised you to do.

Further, the demographics of policing in the UK nationally are changing; recent recruitment campaigns have led to a significant growth in the proportion of younger, inexperienced police

officers (particularly in frontline response roles), so it is ever more crucial that we ensure the training they receive is sufficient and fit for purpose.

As a retired police officer with 22 years' service in frontline policing, I know personally how hard it is to recognise and accept how challenging some incidents are; however, you call on the training and knowledge you have had and hopefully the incident, regardless of what it may be, passes without any significant issues.

But the current case involving a minor with autism seems to highlight a lack of training and understanding needed to deal with these matters. The officers appeared adamant that an arrest was necessary, despite the young girl's demeanor that suggested traits of autistic behavior – hiding away, resistance to being touched, unable to form conversations or look at people directly.

The situation was further compounded by the number of officers present, which was only going to exacerbate her distress. Despite repeated pleas from the girl's mother, the desire to arrest would indicate that these officers have either had little to no training in how to identify symptoms of [neurodiversity](#) and deal and manage this type of situation, or were unable to draw on that training when they needed it most.

Improving responses

As a term, neurodiversity is used to describe differences in individual brain function and behavioural traits; it's about brains being [wired differently rather than wrongly](#), with individuals considered on a spectrum of normal variation in the population.

It's essential that more education around neurodiversity and other conditions is instilled into police training; if not, policing runs the risk of causing real harm to those being policed, while also placing those officers who are in attendance in an exposed situation.

Forces deliver de-escalation techniques and knowledge as part of the officer safety training that all police receive, regardless of their role. This training looks at Acute Behavioural Disturbance, which shares some similar symptoms and behaviours to autism.

However, much more needs to be done within the service to improve understanding and responses to the ever-growing neurodiversity in communities, including updated and fit-for-

purpose training packages.

Only then will we see greater public trust and confidence in policing from those different population groups, while also eradicating incidents where policing is perceived to do more public harm than good.

About the Authors

Having previously been a police officer for 22 years in Humberside Police, **Mike McKue** retired and joined Hull University as a lecturer on the Degree in Professional Policing, and is currently Interim Programme Director. He has extensive policing experience, especially in frontline policing and training of officers in line with the policing education qualifications framework (PEQF). Mike has particular interests in hate crime; gender and policing (especially violence and domestic abuse); counter-terrorism; and people trafficking and modern day slavery.

Dr Meron Wondemaghen is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Hull, and is multidisciplinary as a researcher, drawing from criminology, criminal law, mental health law, psychiatry, and media studies. Her research includes examining the policing of mentally ill persons in public spaces, the criteria of criminal responsibility for mentally ill offenders, and human rights principles for those with mental disability. Dr Meron Wondemaghen's previous roles include teaching in Behavioural Sciences at Monash University (Australia), and Criminology at The University of Southampton.

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