

REORGANISATION, LEADERSHIP, AND THE REAL PROBLEM POLICING IS TRYING TO SOLVE

Adrian James and Carol Cox
Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing Studies,
Liverpool John Moores University
February 2026

THE
POLICE
FOUNDATION

The UK's policing think tank

Debate about the wholesale reorganisation of policing in England and Wales has returned once again. Proposals to reduce the current 43 forces to a much smaller number are being presented as a response to persistent pressures: stretched resources, uneven performance, growing complexity, and a widespread sense that the system is struggling to cope. At the same time, the College of Policing has announced a review of police leadership, which has now begun to hear evidence. The coincidence of these developments is significant.

Together, they raise a more fundamental question than organisational structure alone: how is strain currently governed in policing, and what kind of leadership is required to manage it?

Structural reorganisation is attractive because it appears decisive, promising efficiency, coherence, and modernisation.

Leadership reviews are attractive for similar reasons but there is a risk that both focus on organisational form rather than organisational function; on structures, competencies, and working arrangements instead of how pressure actually is managed in everyday police work.

1. Policing does not lack the will to reform

Policing in England and Wales is not resistant to change. Reform is constant. New frameworks, governance arrangements, technologies, roles, and expectations are introduced routinely. If anything, the system is characterised by continual adaptation. Policing continues to function, but at increasing organisational cost. This tells us something important. The problem is not whether policing should be reformed, but how 'organisational strain' is, and should be, distributed and managed across the institution.

2. Strain as a permanent condition

Much of the reorganisation debate implicitly treats pressure as a temporary problem that can be corrected through better design. In practice, strain is a permanent condition of contemporary policing. Demand routinely exceeds capacity. Legal, safeguarding, and evidential (particularly in the context of digital evidence) expectations continue to expand. Very little work formally is removed. Strain, in this sense, is not just workload or stress. It is an organisational condition that accumulates over time. It shows up in chronic time scarcity, reliance on informal workarounds, and the

gradual erosion of supervision and experience (Laufs et al., 2020; Fleming and Grabosky, 2024). Crucially, it links performance, culture and wellbeing:

the same conditions that make it harder to do the job well, also make it harder to sustain those doing it .

3. Leadership and the governance of limits

Analytically, this is where leadership becomes central. Leadership often is discussed in terms of capability, style, or culture. In this context, a more revealing way to think about it is as the governance of limits. In policing, limits are recognised widely but named only rarely. Instead of explicit organisational prioritisation, officers and supervisors are left to manage overload individually. Decisions about what cannot be done are made quietly, at too low a level, without formal authorisation or even acknowledgement, and with personal, rather than organisational, risk attached (James, Cox, and Carr, 2025). This pattern closely reflects classic analyses of street-level bureaucracy, in which frontline workers, confronted with excessive demand and limited resources, are compelled to ration services informally; absorbing responsibility for organisational shortcomings they do not control (Lipsky, 2010). This is not a failure of awareness or of professionalism. Rather, it reflects a normative mode of governance in which organisational legitimacy and defensibility are maintained at the centre, while the practical consequences of overload are managed closer to the frontline. Increasingly, that model is unsustainable.

What distinguishes leadership under conditions of chronic scarcity is not awareness of pressure but the willingness to formalise its consequences. In the absence of explicit organisational prioritisation, leadership activity tends to function as a form of symbolic buffering: translating external expectations into reassurance without absorbing the practical costs of overload, which instead are displaced downward. This produces the appearance of protection at the centre, while increasing exposure at the periphery. In contrast,

authorising limits requires leaders to name what will not be done, to accept responsibility for omission as well as action, and to defend those decisions publicly.

However, contemporary leadership frameworks tend to emphasise competence, resilience, and adaptability rather than the governance of loss, leaving the hardest decisions unarticulated.

4. Managing overload at the frontline

While debates about reorganisation and leadership often remain at a high level of abstraction, recent empirical research also illustrates how the governance of strain operates in practice (James, Cox, and Carr, 2025). Qualitative interviews with detectives across five police forces in England and Wales showed that organisational overload is not primarily managed through explicit prioritisation or formal de-prioritisation. Instead, it is absorbed quietly at the frontline, where officers and supervisors make informal decisions about what realistically can and cannot be done. These decisions rarely are authorised, recorded, or owned organisationally, but they have direct consequences for investigative quality, officer wellbeing, and public service.

Consistent with repeated findings from police oversight and organisational research, which show that demand pressures in policing routinely are managed through informal prioritisation at the frontline rather than through explicit organisational decision-making (HMICFRS, 2019, 2023, 2025), detectives consistently described working under conditions where demand exceeded capacity. Caseloads far exceeded manageable levels, digital evidence backlogs were persistent, and procedural requirements continued to expand.

5. Leadership, legitimacy, and the displacement of risk

In this context, leadership was not experienced as a mechanism for setting limits but as a source of additional expectations. Senior organisational priorities largely remained unchanged, while responsibility for managing overload was displaced downward. As one detective put it, investigative work became less about solving cases and more about ‘deciding what to leave undone without saying so.’ The same organisational pressures that compromised investigative effectiveness also eroded staff morale and wellbeing, linking performance decline and workforce attrition in a reinforcing cycle.

Importantly, this pattern did not reflect leadership indifference or a lack of professional commitment. Local supervisors often were described as supportive and aware of the pressures their teams faced. In many cases, those supervisors were experiencing the same pressures. The difficulty lay elsewhere:

there seemed to be an unspoken acceptance that organisational legitimacy depended on maintaining the illusion that all demands could be met when operational reality made that impossible.

As a result, limits were recognised by frontline staff informally but avoided institutionally. Leadership functioned less as the governance of scarcity and more as the preservation of organisational defensibility, leaving those staff to carry the practical and emotional consequences of unresolved overload. Oversight bodies repeatedly have identified this gap, noting that while senior leaders often are aware of capacity constraints, formal mechanisms for prioritisation and de-prioritisation remain weak or underdeveloped (for example, HMICFRS, 2023).

6. The logic of additive reform

Most police reform is additive. New initiatives and requirements are introduced without removing existing ones. Politically, additive reform is safe: it allows leaders to demonstrate action without naming loss. Organisationally, however, its effects are cumulative and almost wholly negative. Workflows thicken, coordination demands increase, and documentation expands. These demands fall on a workforce that is, on average, younger and less experienced than in previous years (HMICFRS, 2025), reducing the stock of tacit knowledge and supervisory capacity on which organisations have traditionally relied to absorb strain. Maintaining the same level of performance therefore requires increasing effort, with pressure absorbed informally by officers and supervisors through extended work, discretionary prioritisation, and quiet omission.

Additive reform persists not because organisations misunderstand its consequences, but because subtraction is both institutionally and politically difficult.

Removing tasks, lowering standards, or setting aside responsibilities exposes leaders to challenge...

...from oversight bodies, partners, victims’ groups, and the media, all of whom are positioned to contest visible reductions in service. By contrast, addition signals responsiveness, diligence, and modernisation, and is more readily recognised as legitimate leadership activity. New initiatives, frameworks, and governance arrangements demonstrate control without requiring explicit statements about what will no longer be done. In this sense, additive reform is not an accident of poor design but a rational response to asymmetric risk: the

risks of removal are immediate and visible, while the costs of accumulation are diffuse and delayed.

7. The cumulative effect of additional requirements

Over time, this logic produces organisations in which formal commitments systematically exceed practical capacity. Expectations accumulate across safeguarding, evidential standards, partnership working, digital investigation, and performance management, while very little pre-existing work formally is removed. The result is not organisational failure but organisational thickening. Coordination requirements multiply and assurance mechanisms expand, while practices that were once exceptional become normalised ways of keeping work moving despite limited capacity. The organisation continues to function, but at (largely invisible) increasing human and organisational costs.

8. Reorganisation and temporal concentration

Reorganisation often intensifies rather than resolves these dynamics.

Structural change introduces new governance layers, transitional arrangements, and integration costs while inheriting existing expectations and unresolved demand.

During periods of reorganisation, explicit prioritisation commonly is deferred in the name of continuity, stability, or risk management. Legacy systems are retained ‘for assurance,’ and new structures are layered on top. In already strained systems, this prolongs uncertainty and amplifies workload; particularly for those tasked with translating abstract organisational change into everyday practice. Wholesale reorganisation therefore can be understood as an especially large-scale instance of additive reform.

Leadership activity under these conditions becomes oriented toward managing appearances of coherence rather than recalibrating organisational scope. Senior leaders may recognise the unsustainability of accumulated expectations, but without authorised mechanisms for subtraction they are left to demonstrate control through further initiatives, reviews, or restructurings. Pressure is redistributed rather than reduced, displaced downwards and outwards rather than resolved. Policing does not fail; arguably, the thin blue line has never been completely broken, but it becomes harder to hold together. In the absence of

formal prioritisation, supervision and experience can help sustain performance, but neither is inexhaustible (James, Cox, and Carr, 2025; Tong and O’Neill, 2020).

These dynamics are particularly visible when organisations rely on time-limited initiatives. Operation Kairos, a recent multi-agency project aimed at reducing youth offending in an English police force, illustrates how leadership briefly can generate coherence without altering the underlying dynamics of strain (James, 2026). In its early phase, Kairos benefited from exceptional focus, close leadership presence, and a tightly defined problem remit. These conditions produced rapid and visible results, reinforcing confidence in the initiative and in those leading it.

However, that success depended on a concentration of organisational energy that could not be sustained without explicit decisions about priority and trade-offs. As competing demands reasserted themselves, governance arrangements multiplied, leadership roles rotated, and responsibility for the initiative became increasingly diffuse. Kairos neither was resourced nor authorised as a standing capability, and no clear organisational decision was made about what other work would be displaced to sustain it. As attention shifted elsewhere, the conditions that had produced early coherence weakened and the initiative gradually was absorbed back into routine practice. Its decline was not a failure of leadership quality but a predictable outcome of an organisation unable to formalise limits under conditions of scarcity, reflecting a well-documented tendency in policing reform whereby concentrated organisational effort dissipates as competing demands reassert themselves (Kalyal et al., 2018; del Pozo et al., 2025).

Together, these examples underline a central problem in contemporary policing reform.

Leadership and reorganisation repeatedly are mobilised as solutions to strain and yet both tend to avoid the explicit articulation of organisational limits.

Whether at the level of everyday work or high-profile initiatives, pressure is managed through informal adjustment rather than authorised prioritisation. Without an institutional language for subtraction, and support for leaders to say ‘no’, leadership activity redistributes strain rather than reducing it. Reorganisation may change structures, and leadership reviews may refine competencies, but neither alters how scarcity is governed unless they confront what policing can no longer do; and who is accountable for those decisions.

9. Why reorganisation debates and leadership reviews keep returning

The recurrence of both structural reform and leadership reviews is not accidental. They solve a particular problem: legitimacy. They signal action, responsibility, and modernisation without requiring explicit statements about what policing can or will no longer do.

Comparative research on police reform shows that this pattern is not unique to England and Wales: across jurisdictions, leadership reform and structural change repeatedly function as symbolic responses to pressure, offering reassurance and legitimacy while leaving underlying capacity constraints largely untouched (Terpstra and Fyfe, 2015; Huey and Ricciardelli, 2016; Terpstra, 2020). Reorganisation promises improvement without naming loss. Leadership reviews promise better leadership without confronting the organisational impossibility of meeting even existing expectations. Both avoid the hardest questions: what should be prioritised, what should be deprioritised, and who owns the consequences?

Reorganisation debates and leadership reviews persist because they offer a publicly legible response to organisational strain in a context where explicit rationing is difficult, politically. In contrast, naming limits requires leaders to acknowledge omission, uneven service, and managed decline; positions that sit uneasily with democratic expectations of universal provision and procedural fairness. As a result, reform activity gravitates toward interventions that promise improvement without confronting scarcity directly. This dynamic helps explain why similar reform conversations recur even when their structural preconditions remain unchanged. Reorganisation and leadership reviews do not fail because they are insincere or misguided, but because repeatedly they are asked to perform a function they cannot fulfil; resolving capacity constraints without authorising loss.

10. Lessons from history

This pattern has historical depth. Much has been made of the limitations of past reform efforts (see, for example, Leishman, Cope, and Starie, 1996; Mather and Seifert, 2016), but both...

...the Sheehy Inquiry (1993) and the Winsor Review (2012) recognised, albeit in different ways, the need for subtraction.

Each questioned inherited assumptions and identified areas where policing might do less. However, in neither case did the police response involve a sustained redefinition of organisational scope. What policing would stop doing was never articulated with sufficient clarity, and subtraction seemed to be identified by the institution as loss rather than relief. In contrast, some international systems have authorised explicit prioritisation (see, for example, James, Cox, and Carr, 2025a). Formal thresholds, case caps, and organisational acceptance of omission do not remove strain, but they redistribute it collectively rather than silently. The critical difference lies not in leadership quality, but in the presence of authorised limits.

The Sheehy Inquiry illustrates how politically difficult such explicit confrontation with limits can be. Largely recalled for its proposals on contracts, performance pay, and managerial reform, the intensity of opposition it provoked is revealing. Resistance reflected not only disagreement with particular recommendations, but also discomfort with the way Sheehy rendered subtraction visible: tenure, security, and the conditions under which policing labour might be withdrawn or reshaped. By foregrounding loss as well as improvement, the Inquiry exposed the political risks attached to naming limits explicitly. The subsequent retreat from its proposals can therefore be read less as a rejection of reform than as an early lesson in the costs of confronting limits directly.

A similar dynamic is evident in the Winsor Review. Framed as a programme of modernisation, Winsor focused on pay, progression, competence, and professionalism, seeking to improve efficiency and performance within existing expectations of policing. While controversial, the review largely left organisational scope untouched. What policing was expected to deliver remained implicit, even as the conditions under which that work was performed were altered. Criticism centred on issues of morale, fairness, and operational realism, but it also reflected a deeper unease: pressure was being addressed indirectly, through incentives and structures, rather than through explicit decisions about priority and capacity. In this sense, Winsor exemplifies a recurring pattern in police reform. Change without the recalibration of limits.

Altogether, these historical and comparative cases reveal a consistent pattern. Reform efforts repeatedly identify the need for prioritisation or subtraction, yet implementation gravitates toward structures, roles, and leadership development rather than organisational scope. Where reduction does occur, it is experienced as

loss rather than relief because underlying expectations remain unchanged. The recurrence of reform cycles therefore reflects not institutional inertia or resistance to change, but the absence of authorised mechanisms for deciding collectively what policing will no longer do under conditions of scarcity.

1.1. What this moment offers

Much of the current discussion focuses on how policing should be organised and led. Far less attention is being given to a more consequential question: how is the scope of policing defined, limited, and defended when demand persistently exceeds capacity? Reorganisation may redraw boundaries and leadership reviews may refine competencies, but neither will alter the underlying dynamics unless they confront how limits, prioritisation, and risk are governed in practice. An authorised language of limits requires more than internal acknowledgement of scarcity; it depends on political and institutional conditions that legitimise omission as well as action. Institutionally, it will require formal mechanisms that locate responsibility for prioritisation at organisational rather than individual levels, enabling leaders to make collective decisions about scope, thresholds, and risk ownership.

This requirement is particularly salient at a moment when police leadership and force reorganisation are central policy concerns, with a leadership review already underway and a White Paper on police reorganisation signalling renewed structural ambition.

Politically, authorising limits will require central government, oversight bodies, and the Inspectorate to recognise prioritisation and de-prioritisation as necessary features of governance...

under constraint, rather than as evidence of failure or retreat. This involves aligning performance frameworks, inspection regimes, and accountability processes with the realities of constrained capacity, so that restraint is not penalised and discretion is not displaced silently downwards.

From the perspective developed here, the College's leadership review matters less as an assessment of individual leaders than as a point against which to consider whether policing is capable of developing an authorised language for limits. If the review confines itself to behaviours, competencies, and/or structures, it risks adding to the reform burden without changing its effects. If, however, it opens a serious conversation about what policing will no longer do under conditions

of scarcity, and how risk will be owned collectively rather than displaced informally, it could mark a genuine shift. As both everyday investigative practice and time-limited initiatives demonstrate, leadership that does not authorise limits explicitly, leaves police organisations resilient only in appearance. Absent such a shift and the effect is not resolution but displacement: 'Organisational Strain' absorbed quietly by individuals and local units, with cumulative consequences for staff wellbeing, retention, and the sustainability of policing itself.

12. References

- Del Pozo, B., Nevill, R. E., Cepeda, J., Adams, I. T., Whiteside, A., & Thompson, E. (2025, 03 June). Why innovations in policing don't work or don't translate: An implementation science survey of us police leaders. *Police Practice and Research*, pp.1-21. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2025.2512806>
- Fleming, J., and Grabosky, P., (2024) Managing the demand for police services, or how to control an insatiable appetite. *Policing (Bradford, England)*, 3, pp.281-91. doi:10.1093/policing/pap019
- HMICFRS (2019) State of policing: The annual assessment of policing in England and Wales 2018. Accessed on 13/10/2025. Available at: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/publications/state-of-policing-the-annual-assessment-of-policing-in-england-and-wales-2018>
- HMICFRS. 2023 Police performance: getting a grip. Accessed on 12/3/2025. Available at: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/publication/html/police-performance-getting-a-grip>
- HMICFRS (2025) State of policing: The annual assessment of policing in England and Wales 2024/5. Accessed on 22/1/2026. Available at: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/publications/state-of-policing-the-annual-assessment-of-policing-in-england-and-wales-2024-25>
- Huey, L., and Ricciardelli, R. (2016) From seeds to orchards: Using evidence-based policing to address Canada's policing research needs. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 58(1), pp.119-31. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjccj2015.E24>
- James, A. (2026) (2026, 09 Jan) Operation Kairos: entropy and the temporality of organised policing, *Evidence Base*, DOI: 10.1080/30679125.2025.2607612
- James, A.; Cox, C., Carr, R. (2025) Caseloads, culture, and capacity: rethinking investigative policing, *Policing and Society*, DOI: 10.1080/10439463.2025.2573903
- James, A.; Cox, C., Carr, R. (2025a) Craft under strain. Comparative perspectives on detective work in England & Wales, Finland, and Denmark. Technical Report. Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing Studies, LJMU. Accessed on 26/2/2026. Available at: <https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/27380>
- Kalyal, H., Huey, L., Blaskovits, B., and Bennell, C. (2018) 'If it's not worth doing half-assed, then it's not worth doing at all': Police views as to why new strategy implementation fails. *Police Practice and Research*, 21(2), pp.117-33. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2018.1526687>
- Laufs, J., Bowers, K., Birks, D.; Johnson, S.D. (2021) Understanding the concept of 'demand' in policing: a scoping review and resulting implications for demand management. *Policing and Society*, 31(8), pp.895-918. doi:10.1080/10439463.2020.1791862
- Leishman, F., Cope, S. and Starie, P., (1995) Reforming the police in Britain: New public management, policy networks and a tough "old bill". *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 8(4), pp.26-37.
- Lipsky, M., (2010) Street-level bureaucracy: dilemmas of the individual in public service. 76. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Mather, K. and Seifert, R. (2016) Police pay - contested and contestable. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 47(3), pp.204-19.
- Sheehy, S.P. (1993) Inquiry Into Police Responsibilities & Rewards. HM Stationery Office.
- Terpstra, J. (2020) Police reform as institutional change: Symbols and dilemmas. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, 60, pp.1-9. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcrj.2019.100359>
- Terpstra, J. and Fyfe, N.R., (2015) Mind the implementation gap? Police reform and local policing in the Netherlands and Scotland. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 15(5), pp.527-44.
- Tong, S. and O'Neill, M. (2020) Professionalizing criminal investigation - an examination of an early attempt to support specialization in criminal investigation. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 14(2), pp.337-48.
- Tuffin, R., Morris, J., and Poole, A. (2006) An evaluation of the impact of the National reassurance policing programme - Home Office research study 296. Home Office.
- Unison (2014) Trouble in the neighbourhood. Available at: <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2015/08/Trouble-in-the-Neighbourhood-Report.pdf>
- Winsor, T.P. (2012) Independent review of police officer and staff remuneration and conditions - final report. HM Stationery Office.

Authors



Adrian James

Former Scotland Yard detective, Adrian James, is a Reader in Police Studies and Head of Research at the Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing Studies. Awarded his doctorate

by the London School of Economics for research into the origins and development of intelligence-led policing, Adrian has published extensively in the areas of intelligence and investigation. He has completed evaluative studies of professional practice in those areas for the College of Policing, the Home Office; and the National Police Chiefs' Council. His current research interests are investigative performance, criminal intelligence practice, and institutional reform.



Carol Cox

Carol Cox was a police officer with Merseyside Police before moving into academia. She was awarded a PhD for her research into police culture and education and is now Professor of Policing and

Head of Policing at the Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing Studies. Carol has led major Police Education Qualification Framework partnerships with UK police forces and conducted national research on behalf of Oscar Kilo, the police wellbeing service. Her current research interests are police reform, police education, police leadership, and staff wellbeing.

© 2026: The Police Foundation

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of The Police Foundation.

Enquiries concerning reproduction should be sent to The Police Foundation.

Email: info@police-foundation.org.uk

www.police-foundation.org.uk

Charity Registration Number: 278257

THE
POLICE
FOUNDATION

The UK's policing think tank