

BRITAIN IS SAFE. SO WHY DOESN'T IT FEEL THAT WAY?

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The government's police reform white paper, published in January, presents a vision for the future of British policing (Home Office, 2026a). It acknowledges what the data confirms. Crime has fallen across most categories for two decades.

By the hard measures, we are safer than we have ever been. But the white paper also confronts a more uncomfortable truth: confidence in local police has fallen from 79 per cent in 2015/16 to 67 per cent in 2024/25 (Office for National Statistics, 2025). Nearly 90 per cent of women do not feel safe walking alone at night (YouGov, 2026). Trust, and feelings of safety, have collapsed while crime fell.

We have spent 20 years making ourselves safer and almost no time asking whether people feel it.

Those are different questions. They have different answers. And the gap between the safety we have achieved and the safety people actually experience is costing us more than we know.

The unmeasured problem

We measure crime. We count offences, response times, detection rates. We have never seriously measured feelings of safety. The white paper signals recognition of this gap, pledging to refocus on prevention through better use of multi-agency data and reformed community safety partnerships (Home Office, 2026, p.13). But there is no point of accountability for the divergence between objective safety and subjective experience. It simply persists unexamined, unmeasured, and at a quiet but real cost to our communities and our economy.

That cost is not abstract. Research consistently shows that feelings of safety shape behaviour in ways that sustain or erode community life. Studies demonstrate that people who feel unsafe are more likely to suffer depression, withdraw from social activities, and exercise less (Dustmann and Fasani, 2016; Pearson and Bretzke, 2014).

These are precisely the behaviours that sustain community life. The presence on the street, the neighbourly intervention, the willingness to invest in a shared space. When people withdraw, social cohesion erodes. And that erosion shows up in how people feel long before it shows up in crime data.

The economic case

The economic consequences follow the same logic. Recent research by Professor James Rockey and colleagues at the University of Birmingham, commissioned by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), provides striking evidence of policing's economic value. Using hedonic housing market valuation, they calculated that every £1 invested in policing yields £4.17 in economic benefits. A 10 per cent increase in policing would generate £14.5 billion in net benefits over 12 years, equivalent to 0.5 per cent of annual GDP (Rockey et al., 2025).

But those returns depend on more than deployment. They depend on legitimacy, on public confidence, on the willingness of communities to co-operate with and support police work. When trust collapses, those multipliers weaken. Investors, businesses, and families making location decisions do not read crime statistics. They ask whether a place feels safe. International evidence shows that highly peaceful countries attract more foreign direct investment than less peaceful ones (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). At neighbourhood level, each cluster of antisocial behaviour incidents is associated with measurable falls in property values (Gibbons, 2004). The economic argument for taking feelings of safety seriously is not soft. It is hard-edged and increasingly well evidenced.

A sense of safety is not a delayed sign of how healthy or prosperous a community is. It serves as an early warning, much like a canary in a coal mine.

Beyond enforcement

So what do we do? The instinct is always to reach for enforcement. More officers, faster response times, tougher sentences. We have tried this, and it has helped achieve a fall in crime: the economic case for investment in policing is now clearly established. But enforcement alone treats public safety as a problem to be reacted to rather than prevented. We have built an elaborate and expensive architecture for dealing with harm after it happens. What we have never seriously done is ask how much of it could have been stopped.

The evidence base for prevention is now substantial. We know that youth summer employment programmes can reduce violence (Heller, 2014). We know that well-designed community spaces reduce both crime and the fear of it (Kondo et al., 2015).[10] We know that targeted violence reduction programmes, when properly designed and delivered in partnership with communities, can reduce serious youth violence (Home Office 2024).

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategies have demonstrated what co-ordinated multi-agency approaches can achieve when properly resourced and led (Home Office, 2026b).

We know that the environmental and social conditions of a place, its housing, its streets, its economic opportunity, the relationships between neighbours can shape safety outcomes far more than the number of officers deployed after the fact. Tokyo's Adachi Ward reduced crime by over 60 per cent in 12 years not by putting more officers on the street, but by investing in neighbourhood environments and community relationships that told residents and everyone else that someone was paying attention. Aesthetic changes, such as planting flowers, played an important role in this (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2015).

None of this sits within a police budget. That is precisely the problem.

Preventing crime requires levers that policing does not hold: housing, planning, transport, employment, public health, education.

The conditions that make women feel safe walking home at night. The interventions that divert young people from violence before they enter the system. The economic opportunities that provide alternatives to informal economies. No single agency controls them. And until now, there has been no single point in our system with both the strategic reach and the democratic accountability to bring them together.

The white paper opportunity

Shared responsibility for safety is not a completely new idea. Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships established this principle and did important work within that frame. But as the white paper acknowledges, the problem they were designed to address was crime reduction. Feelings of safety sat outside the brief.

The white paper's proposals create a new opening. Metro Mayors are uniquely placed to ask that broader public safety question. In London and Manchester, the combined authority model already brings together housing, transport, planning, employment and police oversight under one roof. The English Devolution Bill will extend that reach further across England's city regions. For the first time, we have leaders in our system with both the strategic reach and the democratic accountability to own the whole picture. Not just what happens after harm is done, but the conditions that prevent it arising in the first place.

The white paper proposes significant reforms to the architecture of community safety.

It commits to reforming Community Safety Partnerships to "refocus on prevention through better use of multi-agency data" and replacing Police and Crime Commissioners with new Policing and Crime Boards led by Mayors and council leaders. These are important steps. They recognise that safety is a shared responsibility and create governance structures with the right membership at the table.

But governance structures are not the same as accountability mechanisms. The proposed reforms tell us who should be involved. They do not tell us what question those bodies should be asking, what they should be measuring, or how success will be judged. Without a clear framework for measuring feelings of safety, distinct from crime reduction, there is a risk these new structures simply replicate the performance management systems we already have. Counting the crimes prevented rather than asking whether people feel the benefit.

What is missing is a formal mechanism to make safety accountability real: a Safety Compact.

This could be an annual commitment by every Metro Mayor to ask two questions: do people in this city feel safe, and if not, why not? This would include every relevant agency at the table: housing, transport, health, schools, employers, police and an action plan, signed by the Mayor, with progress tracked and published. Not a new bureaucracy but a new accountability. One that measures what currently goes unmeasured, asks the question that has never been formally posed, and holds someone responsible for the answer.

In practice, a Safety Compact would establish an annual cycle. Each Metro Mayor would commission a public survey specifically measuring feelings of safety across different demographic groups and localities, not crime victimisation but perceived safety. Results would be published alongside crime data, making the gap between objective safety and subjective experience visible and measurable. Each relevant agency would set out what it is contributing to close that gap, with the Mayor accountable for progress against both crime and confidence metrics.

This does not replace investment in policing. The economic evidence for that investment is clear. The white paper's commitment to delivering 13,000 additional neighbourhood policing personnel recognises this (Home Office, 2026a, p.22). But it acknowledges that the returns on that investment depend on the context in which policing operates. On public confidence. On community co-operation. On the social and economic conditions that shape both crime and the fear of it. A Safety Compact would create the mechanism to align those conditions with enforcement capability. To ensure that the £4.17 return on every pound spent on policing is realised not just in crime reduction, but in communities that actually feel the benefit.

We are, by most objective measures, a safe country. The challenge is not to defend that fact but to ensure people experience it

To build the economic and social conditions in which safety becomes a foundation for growth rather than an obstacle to it. For too long we have congratulated ourselves on falling crime figures while ignoring the question that actually shapes how people live, invest, and choose where to put down roots.

The white paper gives us the structures. Metro Mayors have the powers. The evidence is there. What is missing is the mechanism. A Safety Compact could provide it.

Author



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