

Unpacking preventive policing: Towards a holistic framework

International Journal of
Police Science & Management

1–12

© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14613557231163403

journals.sagepub.com/home/psm**Hjørdis Birgitte Ellefsen** 

Norwegian Police University College, Norway

Brita Bjørkelo

Norwegian Police University College, Norway

Inger Marie Sunde

Norwegian Police University College, Norway

Nicholas R. Fyfe

Robert Gordon University, UK

Abstract

Assuming that society is better off if the harm caused by crime – including the costs entailed by the investigation, prosecution and punishment – can be avoided, the proactive approach of preventive policing (PP) is generally promoted and understood as a good and effective solution. In this article, we unpack the concept of PP by analysing how it has been understood and practised across time and space, and find that the ‘preventive turn’ and current aspirations for a police service with a ‘preventative mindset’ seem to require a return to a police role that might be incompatible with the liberal and democratic ideals of today. We argue for the need for a holistic approach and outline six key elements for an overarching theoretical framework that is sensitive to the fundamental challenges of the ‘preventive turn’. This includes arguing for the need for an awareness of how the problems that are to be prevented are defined; how preventative interventions are directed; what role the police and other actors should play; how underlying rationalities and logics may affect the understanding, implementation and outcome of PP; how effects and consequences can be measured; and the need for legal and ethical limitations and guidelines.

Keywords

Preventive policing, holistic framework, police role, preventive turn, transdisciplinary approach

Submitted 18 Oct 2022, Revise received 20 Feb 2023, accepted 24 Feb 2023

Introduction

‘All societies try to stop bad things happening’, and consequently, Freeman (1999: 233) observes, prevention operates at a deep level of cultural order or common sense. But although the general case for prevention is unarguable (‘prevention is better than cure’), specific proposals for prevention may be more contentious. Preventive interventions might be deemed disproportionate to the risk faced; they

might be unjust and not consistent with equality and fairness; they could also be ineffective, too costly and impact negatively on trust and civil liberties. So, although the

Corresponding author:

Hjørdis Birgitte Ellefsen, Research, Norwegian Police University College, Slemdalsveien 5, Oslo 0369, Norway.

Email: birell@phs.no

general importance of prevention is typically unquestioned, when the focus is on agencies such as the police, who must make decisions about which areas, people or problems to focus on, the common sense understanding of prevention quickly unravels.

It is against this background that we focus on the need to unpack the concept of preventive policing (PP). Rather than assuming that PP is always a good thing, we need to identify the rationalities and logics that underpin preventive strategies, highlight the different roles and understandings among the actors engaged, raise questions about the ethics and regulation of PP, and emphasize the importance of knowledge and education in underpinning preventive interventions. Bringing together insights from our respective disciplines (history, psychology, law and geography), we argue from within police science for the need for a more holistic and transdisciplinary approach to how PP is understood, managed, taught and practised, as well as how it affects society.

In the first section of the article, we define and investigate the historical roots of the concept of PP. We then focus on the challenges of the 'preventive turn', highlighting how, at both a conceptual and a practical level, embedding prevention as a mainstream approach has proved very difficult for the police. Finally, we consider a possible way forward by proposing a theoretical framework that draws together the need for an awareness of how the problems to be prevented are defined, how preventative interventions are directed, what role the police and other actors should play, how underlying rationalities and logics may affect the understanding, implementation and outcome of PP, how effects and consequences can be measured, and the need for legal and ethical limitations and guidelines.

Back to the future? A short history of the concept of preventive policing

Policing refers to actions aimed at preserving security and order in society, activities that can take reactive and proactive forms (Bowling et al., 2019). Whereas the use of coercive or intrusive measures in surveillance, investigation, prosecution and other forms of reactive policing in most societies is within the exclusive domain of the police and the public prosecutor's office, a myriad of private and public agencies may be engaged in PP, i.e. actions intended to stop or hinder crime, disorder or other harmful incidents from happening. Furthermore, we can distinguish between actions that are intended to have directly preventative effects, and actions undertaken for other reasons (such as prosecution) that can be argued to have indirect preventative effects (Muir, 2021).

The formation of PP as an extensive multi-agency effort in which partnerships between the police and public, private and not-for-profit organizations are established to prevent a wide range of problems in addition to crime, has been described as a 'preventive turn' in crime control (Crawford and Evans, 2017; Hughes, 1998; Tilley, 2009). Rising crime rates in the 1960s and 1970s led to a pessimism on behalf of the public police's ability to fight and prevent crime, captured in Martinson's (1974) phrase 'nothing works'. The assumed failure of traditional police practices became an argument for a preventive turn (Hughes, 2007), in which the root causes of crime and disorder should be tackled through shared responsibility and multi-agency partnerships consisting of a variety of public and private actors in addition to the police (Crawford and Evans, 2017).

The preventive turn in crime policy has also been seen as a symptom of 'a fundamentally different outlook on social reality' (Peeters, 2015: 166), in which prevention has become the dominant strategy for dealing with a range of risks, such as those related to health, inequality or climate change, as well as crime and terrorism (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997). In other words, the preventive turn is bound up with what Beck (1986) referred to as the emergence of the 'risk society', and the Foucauldian idea of a neoliberal governmentality in which 'dangerous' individuals are seen as 'risks' that should be identified, assessed and managed, rather than as objects of discipline and reformation (Castel, 1991; Rose, 2000). Furthermore, as Zedner (2007) observes, the preventive turn can be seen as a shift from a post- to a pre-crime society, 'a society in which the possibility of forestalling risks competes with and even takes precedence over responding to wrongs done' (p. 262).

The idea of a preventive turn mobilizes an historical narrative in which a 'traditional' reactive approach to policing has been displaced by a 'new' understanding of policing as the management of risk via multi-agency preventative efforts. But, as we shall see, research on the history of policing offers an alternative narrative in which PP as well as a risk management culture can be traced much further back in time.

Originally, the concept of the police was used to describe the 'establishment and maintenance of order' (Knemeyer, 2011), and in the 16th and 17th centuries European rulers issued a multitude of police statutes regulating most aspects of people's lives (Härter and Stolleis, 1996). Police statutes regulated what to believe, how to dress, what to eat, how to celebrate, what to grow and how to trade goods, and prohibited many types of action and behaviour that were defined as harmful to general welfare and security.

According to the *raison d'état* of the absolutist states of the 17th and 18th centuries, the exercise of policing was

clearly distinguished from the exercise of justice, because policing was understood as the sovereign's right and duty to ensure the welfare and security of their subjects through the enforcement of regulations directly aimed at preventing harm (Foucault, 2007). Policing was institutionalized with the bureaucratization of the absolutist state; for example in Denmark and Norway, chief of policing offices ('politimester') were established from the 1680s and given a mandate to enforce the sovereign's police regulations to prevent any form of disorder that could harm general welfare and security (Ellefsen, 2018). In other words, policing was traditionally understood as a direct preventive activity, clearly distinguished from the reactive activity of enforcing justice.

The emergence of police ordinances and police authorities in the early modern period has traditionally been seen as a way to discipline society in order to increase the power of the absolutist state. However, recent investigations of early modern policing in former absolutist states in continental Europe and Scandinavia, show that 'good order and police' were demanded by subjects, and that the implementation police statutes and ordinances required the consensus of the free burghers (Mührmann-Lund, 2016). Even in absolutist states, policing was seen as a civic virtue and a condition of liberty, as was the case in 18th-century Britain where policing was performed by unpaid, propertied gentlemen (Dodsworth, 2004).

From the second half of the 18th century, the absolutist idea of promoting and protecting welfare through police regulations was challenged. Inspired by Immanuel Kant, liberal police scientists argued that police regulations should be restricted to the protection of security and not intervene in matters concerning people's intellectual and material welfare (Stolleis, 2001). Rather than protecting the general welfare of the state against the wrongdoings of its citizens, policing should be directed at protecting the welfare of individual citizens. According to Foucault (2007), the breakthrough of economic liberalism in the 19th century paved way for a liberalist governmentality that was 'opposed term by term to the governmentality outlined in the [absolutist] idea of a police state' (p. 347), where policing was transformed into a reactive activity restricted to maintaining order and protecting security.

In search of the historical roots of modern PP, many have pointed to the formation of London's Metropolitan Police in 1829, captured in Peel's 'Policing Principles' of which the first is 'to prevent crime and disorder' (Bowling et al., 2019: 81; Critchley, 1978: 52–53),¹ through a combination of gathering information relevant to possible crimes and the surveillance of known offenders (O'Malley and Hutchinson, 2006). Political liberals in continental Europe saw Peel's Metropolitan Police as a model to which they might aspire (Emsley, 2012), and professional police forces

with a mandate to prevent crime and disorder through patrolling the streets and detecting crime were established in Stockholm (1850), Oslo (1859), Copenhagen (1863) and many other cities (Ellefsen, 2018).

Consequently, policing was understood as a reactive activity with indirect preventative effects, and throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries PP was seen mainly as a 'scarecrow' function of routine police work (Bowling et al., 2019: 88). In other words, it was taken for granted that police patrols, surveillance and investigation would deter and prevent people from committing crime.

O'Malley and Hutchinson (2006) argue that the police and government of crime was unaffected by the risk-based prevention that characterized other parts of government in the last half of the 19th century. Whereas the insurance industry pressed the fire services to prioritize fire prevention rather than firefighting, the police prioritized 'crime fighting' (in the form of patrols, detections and arrests). Resistance to embracing a more risk-oriented preventative approach was underpinned by a 'cop culture' that valued action-focused activity and viewed prevention as unglamorous, not 'real' police work, and something very difficult to measure compared with the metrics of arrests or detection rates. Dodsworth (2016), however, warns against overlooking the fact that crime fighting was only a minor part of police work, and reminds us that the 'history of preventive policing ... extends beyond "the" police' (p. 41). Investigating the development of policing organizations in England between 1750 and 1850, he finds a large number of private and public organizations concerned with managing the perceived threats of the 'dangerous classes' and the 'risk' of becoming victim of crime. According to Dodsworth, these were PP enterprises related to a 'wider culture of risk management, something that was marked by a growth of insurance as a field of governance' (2016: 53).

To sum up, policing has always been about prevention and was from the beginning a multi-agency enterprise. The introduction of a liberalist governmentality and the establishment of professional public police forces in the mid-19th century, transformed policing into a reactive activity restricted to maintaining order and protecting security. Although other private and public agencies continued to perform activities directed at managing and preventing the risk of crime and disorder, it was no longer understood or defined as PP. From such an historical point of view, the so-called preventive turn of crime policy from the 1970s can be seen as a journey 'back to the future' by reintroducing the idea of policing as a direct preventive activity.

The challenges of the preventive turn

Over the past 40 years, a specialized field of innovative PP strategies has evolved (Weisburd and Braga, 2019). By

introducing the concept ‘problem-oriented policing’ in 1979, Goldstein became the first of many to argue for a more evidence-based police work (Goldstein, 1979). Inspired by theories of rational choice (Clarke and Cornish, 1985), routine activities (Cohen and Felson, 1979) and opportunities (Felson and Clarke, 1998), evidence-based prevention strategies are intended to get upstream of crime and to proactively prevent it rather than merely respond to it. Examples are ‘hotspot policing’, which ensures the deterrent use of visible patrols to prevent crime, ‘intelligence-led policing’, which often focuses on disrupting criminal activity to prevent crimes from being carried through, and ‘predictive -policing’, which involves using algorithms to analyse massive amounts of information in order to predict and prevent potential future crimes. Lum and Koper (2017) in their exploration of evidence-based policing also highlight the contribution to PP of a range of place-based, individual-focused and neighbourhood policing interventions.

Evidence-based PP strategies are associated with wider influences coming from ‘crime science’, which is focused on the application of scientific methods to the study of crime and security problems with the aim of reducing harm and is based on theoretical positions characterized by a common preference for (quasi) experiments and quantitative methods (Cockbain and Laycock, 2017). Underpinning much of the momentum towards these strategies is a political focus on governmentality aimed at efficiency and control through economic forms of reasoning and new public management theory (Ellefsen, 2011) with its preoccupation with performance management and output control (Hood, 1991).

Nevertheless, the police’s capacity to ‘generate preventative effects’ through its regular operations is still emphasized. As part of the 2022 Strategic Review of Policing in England and Wales, Muir (2021), for example, highlighted how when investigating crime and arresting offenders, the police begin a process that can lead to the incapacitation of criminals, and provide entry points to rehabilitative and restorative processes. Furthermore, police activity can have a general deterrent effect, engender trust in the ‘rule of law’ and encourage a disposition towards prosocial behaviour, all of which in theory contribute to PP.

Despite a political consensus that ‘prevention is better than cure’, a sustained and systematic policy focus on PP has been surprisingly difficult to achieve. In part, this reflects the way prevention is a boundless, elusive and expansive concept (Peeters, 2015). PP is boundless in that there are a potentially infinite number of phenomena that can be relevant objects of preventive interventions, leaving the police, for example, with the difficult task of deciding whether they should focus on the prevention of corruption and environmental crime or on domestic

violence; on the harms caused by drug crimes, or responding to reports of missing persons; on prioritizing interpersonal violence or property crimes, and so on. PP is also elusive, because although it may be possible to assess changes in the levels of a particular crime before and after an intervention, it can be difficult to isolate causal factors or define what counts as sufficient prevention in a particular context. In addition, PP is expansive in that a focus on prevention typically drives attention towards tackling the causes of crime and disorder via increased surveillance, monitoring, early intervention and so on, which raises questions about respect for fundamental rights and freedoms and public perceptions of the legitimacy of police actions.

Indeed, however successful it is in preventing crime and other harmful incidents, PP may entail negative consequences in the form of excessive surveillance, control, human suffering, and loss of trust and legitimacy (Holley et al., 2020; Lageson, 2022). This is what Loader (2006) refers to as ‘ambient policing’, where policing begins to take on a pervasive role across all areas of social life. A vicious circle of crime, threats and countermeasures may, in the end, put democracy at risk. Remembering why the ideal of policing as a direct preventive activity was left behind in the mid-19th century – that it was seen as boundless, intrusive and incompatible with liberal and democratic ideals – the potential negative consequences of PP should not be unexpected. This shows a need not only for knowledge about how to prevent current problems, and about the dilemmas and potential risks of PP, but also about the role of the police in problem-solving, with special awareness of the kind of preventive efforts the police should *not* engage in.

In addition to these broad challenges, there are some more specific, systemic issues that contribute to the lack of sustained focus given to PP. Muir (2021), for example, highlights political short-termism (prevention is typically a longer game than 3–5-year political cycles), fragmented policymaking, lack of ‘cashable savings’ (preventative measures seldom produce immediate cost reductions), evidence of the efficacy of interventions may not be strong, preventive measures can involve costs that private and public actors would rather avoid, and traditional ideas about human agency and responsibility drive attention towards the pursuit of justice (for instance, punishment is often seen as a more appropriate state response to a crime than diverting an offender into a programme that might reduce future offending).

Recent police reforms have not made any significant difference with ensuring a stronger focus on prevention in the police (Fyfe et al., 2013). Despite political and policy rhetoric about the need for police organizations to develop a stronger ‘preventive mindset’, the reality has been reforms that are vague when it comes to what, how, why and at

what costs prevention should be achieved (Bland et al., 2021). In Scotland, for example, the legislation that merged the regional forces into a single service, Police Scotland, set out a normative vision with deliberate echoes to the ‘Peelian principles of policing’ focusing on partnership working, community well-being and prevention:

The main purpose of policing is to improve the safety and well-being of persons, localities and communities in Scotland, and that the Police Service, working in collaboration with others where appropriate, should seek to achieve that main purpose by policing in a way which (i) is accessible to and engaged with local communities, and (ii) promotes measures *to prevent crime, harm and disorder*. (Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act, 2012, para 32, our emphasis)

In practice, however, the early years of Police Scotland were characterized by a shifting ‘culture of control’ (Garland, 2001), away from a strategy of prevention and partnership, and towards a ‘sovereign state strategy’ of crime control focused on intensive enforcement. Exemplifying this was the increasing use of the tactic of stop and search, with recorded stops in the nine months following the establishment of Police Scotland increasing by over 400% in some areas. As public concerns grew about the increasing use of this tactic, a report commissioned to investigate this concluded that it could find no evidence that the use of stop and search contributed to a reduction in violence (see Fyfe, 2016: 170–175).

Even where prevention has been an explicit focus of new policing initiatives, significant challenges have been encountered in embedding this in practice. In England and Wales, for example, attempts have been made to get the police to engage with evidence-based policing as a way of orientating them towards a more preventative mindset. In 2013, the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction was launched with the long-term aim of changing the organizational culture of the police and other crime reduction practitioners, to increase their use of research evidence for policy and strategic decision-making and to make evidence use a ‘professional norm’ (Hunter et al., 2017).² However, evaluation studies have revealed that even though officers were positive about evidence-based policing and the training they received, they felt that lack of organizational resources and the organizational culture were significant obstacles when it came to implementing it in practice (Fleming et al., 2016). Furthermore, in a mixed-methods study of 19 police forces in England and Wales in 2019, Bullock et al. (2022) found that many officers characterized evidence-based thinking as inaccessible and ‘academic’, and that ‘many police organisations were neither geared up to best absorb the knowledge base

that does exist nor to use it to orient practice’ (Bullock et al., 2022: 8).

Similar findings were reported by Gundhus (2012), in an ethnographic study of the Norwegian Police Service’s response to the political demand for ‘knowledge-based’ PP. According to Gundhus, the demand was met with resistance from police practitioners, who from their street-level occupational subculture perceived academic knowledge as a threat to their experience-based knowledge and professional discretion. Den Heyer (2022) reports similar findings in a study of the adoption of evidence-based policing by police agencies in the United States. Although most of the officers understood what evidence-based policing is and were amenable to its adoption and use, the organizational structures were not capable of supporting an evidence-based practice.

In 2011, the New Zealand Police launched a ‘Prevention First’ strategy that aimed to reduce crime and improve the relationship between the public and the police by securing a victim-oriented and preventative mindset informing everything the police did (New Zealand Police, 2017). The strategy was premised on the notion of crime prevention through the delivery of community policing, focusing on six key drivers of crime (alcohol, youth, families, roads, organized crime, drugs and mental health; New Zealand Police, 2017: 8–9). Evaluating the effects, den Heyer (2021) found that although some forms of crime have declined since 2011, whereas others (including homicide and sexual assaults) have increased or remained the same. Furthermore, reported public satisfaction with the police has remained unchanged, and the percentage of police staff members that are not engaged, ambivalent or actively disengaged remains high (78%). Locker et al. (2011) have criticized the Prevention First strategy for being based on an ‘over-simplistic notion’ of communities, offending and the role of the police, and for ignoring the role of other agencies that are in a better position than the police to perform interventions directed at the root causes of crime (cited in den Heyer, 2021: 136). Furthermore, the strategy seems to: (a) tend to have been based on specialist initiatives rather than an overall approach, (b) be narrowly focused on crime, and (c) ignore wider ethical issues around the risks of ambient policing.

The future of preventive policing: towards an overarching holistic framework

Policies on the prevention of crime and promotion of public safety place much emphasis on the police establishing a preventative mindset that informs everything they do. But, as illustrated in the above examples, the police seem to have been insufficient in living up to this ideal and

dealing with the challenges of the preventive turn. According to Muir (2021), we need to ‘consider what role society as a whole (including non-policing public agencies, the private sector and local communities) should play in promoting public safety and security’ in order to be ‘clearer about what should be expected of the police’ (p. 4). Building on evidence from public health and other policy areas where preventative systems have been established, Muir argues for the need to establish a ‘crime and harm prevention system’ that ensures cross-departmental efforts and defines ownership and responsibilities on a national as well as local level (2021: 23). Such a system, however, presupposes transdisciplinary research and a shared conceptual framework that draws together discipline-specific theories, models, methods and measures into a new synthesis.

Against this background, the final section of this article argues for the need for a more holistic and transdisciplinary approach to the analysis of PP. In the field of public health promotion in the 1980s, a social ecological model was established based on recognition of the need for more holistic and transdisciplinary preventative approaches that considered the complex interplay between individual, relationship, community and societal factors (Stokols, 1996: 283). Today, the model is used in the transdisciplinary exploration and prevention of a wide array of societal problems, including criminal behaviour like violence and sexual abuse (Stokols, 2018). Inspired by this approach, we present six questions, the responses to which require application of a transdisciplinary perspective drawing inspiration from the social sciences, the humanities and the law, in addition to perspectives and knowledge accumulated in prevention research based on crime science. It is our belief that responding to these questions may help define some key elements in an overarching holistic framework that enables an understanding of PP as a multi-agency endeavour that is sensitive to a complexity of factors at play.

What is the problem and who/what is a(t) risk?

Before deciding on the most suitable preventative responses to a certain problem, the problem that is to be prevented should be scrutinized. The objects of PP are social constructions whose existence as problems depends on someone problematizing (questioning, analysing, classifying and regulating) them. Inspired by Foucauldian post structuralism, Bacchi (2012) argues that the study of problematizations can give access to the theoretical and political thinking behind taken-for-granted truths in governing practices. As a governing practice, PP also rests on taken-for-granted truths that may be dismantled by studying its problematizations.

For example, if we study how and why ‘gangs’ have been defined as a problem to be prevented, we find a complexity of theories, ideologies, myths and beliefs that shape how the problem is understood, classified and regulated today. If such underlying rationalities are not identified and assessed, we risk letting ‘truths’ that are in fact based on myths, beliefs or ideologies, affect our understanding of what may be suitable preventative measures. For example, Leirvik and Ellefsen (2020) uncover how underlying rationalities affect the police’s choice of a preventative response towards gangs and antisocial behaviour in multi-ethnic areas in Norway: whereas police officers who understood the problems in multi-ethnic areas as socio-economically conditioned emphasized dialogue-based explanatory approaches, police officers who understood the problems as culturally conditioned were more inclined to choose repressive and intrusive methods.

Which types of intervention?

A second question to be investigated is which types of preventative interventions that are most appropriate in particular contexts. Crime prevention literature often distinguishes between person-oriented interventions that may be directed at general developmental issues or more specifically at persons at risk, community-oriented interventions that are most often directed at strengthening social capital and collective efficacy, and situation-oriented interventions that focus on reducing opportunities and increasing risks. A fourth category is criminal justice interventions, which involve incapacitation, individual deterrence and rehabilitation, initiated through law enforcement. In practice, the categories tend to overlap, and other agencies engaged in the prevention of crime and disorder might not find them as useful as the police.

Arguing for a more holistic approach to crime prevention, Bjørge (2016) distinguishes between nine types of preventative mechanisms: (a) establishing normative barriers; (b) reducing recruitment to criminal social environments and activities; (c) deterrence through threats of negative sanctions; (d) disrupting criminal acts; (e) incapacitate and deny the ability to carry out criminal acts; (f) protect vulnerable targets; (g) reduce harmful consequences of crime; (h) reduce the rewards from crime; and (i) assist people to desist, quit and be rehabilitated.

Muir (2021) argues that the three-tiered model of public health intervention, which distinguishes between primary, secondary and tertiary interventions (see for example Korchin, 1976), is a more suitable framework for PP. This is because it is more capacious and flexible, and therefore resonates better across disciplines, time and place. Primary intervention involves measures to target normal populations in order to preclude problems from developing

in the first place, in other words targeting the root causes of crime, disorder and other harmful incidents. Secondary prevention involves intervening early, before a behaviour and practice formally requires any type of reactive police intervention, to prevent it from becoming established or developing further. The aim of tertiary intervention is to reduce the duration and impact of established disorders; for example, by making sure ongoing crime is well managed to reduce further harmful consequences.

An alternative terminology building on the same typology has been suggested by Coote (2012), who describes primary interventions as upstream aims to prevent harm before it occurs; secondary interventions as midstream aims to reduce the impact of harm that has already occurred by introducing initiatives to prevent it from reoccurring; and tertiary interventions as downstream aims to mitigate the impact of ongoing harm. Bland et al. (2021) operationalizes Coote's typology in an analysis of innovative PP practices, breaking it down along three dimensions: the focus of the prevention activity, the preventive practices employed, and the partners with which the police collaborate. They stress the importance of the police recognizing the value of investing in new partnerships because they create opportunities to collaborate, innovate and focus more sharply on the prevention of harm. This brings us to the next key element of an overarching holistic framework for PP, which concerns identifying the responsible actors and their role in the preventative measures.

Who are the responsible actors, and what role should they play?

Muir (2021) argues that the police should rarely deliver, or at least not lead, primary preventative interventions. Instead, they should focus on tertiary preventative interventions, which is essentially what we earlier referred to as the police's capacity to generate preventative effects through regular law enforcement, and secondary preventative interventions, which means cooperating with other agencies to stop emerging problems from developing further.

Primary preventative interventions address the root causes of the problems, take the police into territory for which they are not trained, and involve the police in forms of social engineering that might not be viewed as appropriate by wider society. Engaging in primary preventative interventions also increases the risk of ambient policing, which 'makes security pervasive in ways that, in the end, foster and sustain the very insecurity it purports to attack' (Loader, 2006: 209). Loader argues for the need to narrow down to a more reactive and rights-based police role, and leave the responsibility for addressing the root causes of crime and disorder to other agencies. This

is in line with Bowling et al. (2019), who argue that '[g]ood policing may help to preserve social order: it cannot produce it. Yet increasingly that is being demanded of the police. ... policing is at best symptom-relief like aspirin. ... And it always leaves unwelcome secondaries' (p. xvi).

History shows, however, that the police are often held responsible when new types of problems not defined as the responsibility of other agencies, arise. The problematization of epidemics, drugs and online harassment, abuse and fraud as objectives of PP may serve as illustrative examples.

In the second half of the 19th century, venereal diseases and epidemics were defined as a problem belonging to the police. So-called 'police doctors' were appointed in European cities, and given a mandate to prevent the spread of disease by performing mandatory health checks on women engaged in prostitution (Ellefsen, 2018). With the Contagious Diseases Acts passed by the UK Parliament in 1864, 1866 and 1869, the police were given a mandate to arrest suspected prostitutes so they could be objected to forcible examination and detention to prevent the spreading of venereal diseases (Dodsworth, 2016). After the establishment of a public health system, disease was defined as a problem belonging to the health authorities and hence the preventative role of the police was reduced to tertiary interventions in the case of epidemics and mental illness.

Today, drugs are a problem with no clear owner as it is debated whether the problem should belong to the health authorities or the police. The conflicting ideals of the traditional 'war on drugs' versus the new 'care for drug addicts' makes it difficult to define what role the police should play (Mohammad and Fulkerson, 2015). As long as the war on drugs was an undisputed ideal, the police could engage in primary preventative interventions, such as the 'Scare Straight', 'DARE' and 'Just Say No' programmes, with support from the public majority (Benavie, 2009). Today, these kinds of interventions are met with critique from a growing number who find them more harmful than doing nothing (see for example Petrosino et al., 2003).

Online/cyber harassment, abuse and fraud are a newer type of problem that – apart from being criminalized and therefore defined as a problem belonging to the police – have been assigned no clear owner when it comes to prevention (Sunde and Sunde, 2021). In such situations, given Bittner's definition of police work as 'something-that-ought-not-to-be-happening-and-about-which-someone-had-better-do-something-now!' (2005: 162), the police are often assigned the responsibility of taking a lead in primary and secondary intervention efforts. The role of the police being a type of 'deliverer' of societal reactions towards new problems until a formal reaction has been established.

The final report of the Strategic Review of Policing in England and Wales (Muir et al., 2022) concludes that the police have neither the capacity nor the capability to address the range, volume and complexity of public safety challenges alone. Instead, it argues, the government should produce a cross-departmental crime prevention strategy in which the police's role is limited to promoting 'public safety by maintaining order and upholding the law, which their unique powers enable them to do, and to carry out other activities which enable them to perform this core role legitimately, effectively and with minimum reliance on those powers' (Muir et al., 2022: 11). Cross-departmental prevention strategies may improve, although not solve, the above-described situations, where the ownership of a problem is unclear, and where the police are pushed into an ambient preventive role that should be avoided. The possibility of stopping and preventing all harm is a *fata morgana*. The belief in finding a 'cure' that can exterminate a disease (e.g. polio) is not necessarily the best metaphor for a social phenomenon like PP.

Which rationalities and logics are at play?

PP is a social phenomenon heavily dependent on the context in which it is constructed. Therefore, it is impossible to make models, manuals or rules that, once and for all, define how PP should be done and by whom. On the other hand, prevention typologies that account for levels of intervention and what role the involved actors should play, may be sustainable if they are sensitive to the rationalities and logics at play in different contexts.

There is general recognition that prevention is difficult to define (Coote, 2012), and that the notion of prevention described in ambitious government policy documents tends to be vague (Gough, 2015). Since the 1970s, several theoretical models of PP have been suggested by academia, stressing the need for more knowledge-based policies and practices (Fielding et al., 2020; Tilley and Sidebottom, 2017). However, the scientific rationalities at play in the PP theories do not necessarily correspond with the ideologies and governmentalities at play in policy-making (Ellefsen, 2011). Furthermore, in the meeting with different logics at play in the field of practice, the prevention strategies may result in hybrid forms emerging (Gundhus, 2012; Hughes, 2007).

To understand better what hinders or facilitates the implementation of theory into policy and practice, we have to: (a) identify the rationalities and logics at play in the development of PP as an academic, political and professional field; (b) investigate how these rationalities and logics interact in specific cases and contexts; and (c) explore the processes of policy transfer that lead to forms of PP 'travelling' from one jurisdiction and being

adapted in another. This includes recognizing the impact of certain scientific rationalities, for example crime science, on what is considered valid knowledge, and how to measure effects, and accounting for the impact governmentalities – for example 'risk management mentality' (Johnston and Shearing, 2003) and new public management – may have when theories and strategies are put into practice. When it comes to logics, economic logics may hinder full-scale or long-term implementation (Muir, 2021), professional logics may oppose new ways of thinking (Fleming et al., 2016; Gundhus, 2012) and digital and algorithmic logics may obscure the many layers of considerations, professional and cultural, that underlie how knowledge comes into being using digital working tools (Gundhus et al., 2022; Kaufmann and Leese, 2021).

The recent observation of the development of an overarching logic of an 'abstract police' in many Western countries over the past 15 years is relevant here (Terpstra et al., 2019). 'Abstract police' refers to the ways in which the police increasingly appear to operate more at a distance, are more impersonal and formal, less direct and more decontextualized, and have become more dependent on 'systems' and 'system knowledge' framed within the logics of digitalized data systems. As police organizations become more 'abstract' in terms of their internal and external relations, the implementation of a multi-agency PP approach may become even more challenging (Terpstra et al., 2019, 2022).

What are the effects and consequences?

A fundamental challenge in assessing the effects and consequences of PP is related to measurement, including measuring complex chains of causality and attribution between an intervention and its effect (Andersen and Skardhamar, 2015). As Crawford and Evans (2017) point out, debates about 'what works' are often struggles over the status of different criteria and public values that are not easily reducible to a universally accepted component of efficiency. Parallel to the micro-oriented effect assessments of evidence-based policing (quantitative randomized experiments) and problem-oriented policing (mixed-methods and quasi-experiments), critical criminologists have tended to be more macro-oriented towards the larger consequences of PP. According to Hughes (2007), both perspectives are important when assessing PP efforts.

The costs and benefits of PP are monetary as well as related to societal concerns on privacy and surveillance, legal procedures and fairness in who is being targeted and/or exposed to PP measures. Effects and consequences are typically heterogeneous and vary by local context or even officer characteristics (training, education and experience). This variability must be given attention when

assessing the (un)intended effects and consequences of PP. Because PP initiatives come with both benefits and costs, the goal should be to measure these outcomes (human and economic).

What are the legal and ethical limitations?

The legal and ethical framework for PP is underdeveloped, leaving wide scope for discretion and a lack of consistent professional standards. Broad ethical and legal reflection is required to develop laws and guidelines on a par with this challenge (Lawless, 2020). Ethico-legal challenges posed by the invasive potential in emergent technology should be investigated (Paulsen, 2019; Sunde, 2020); for example, how the use of such technologies challenges the welfare and perceived safety of citizens. Also, normative investigations, considerations central to person-oriented (secondary) preventive interventions, should be analysed in the light of procedural justice, particularly towards vulnerable groups (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003).

The potential need to regulate the discretionary powers of the police in performing PP must be addressed, similarly the legal conditions for the utilization of new technology in PP, such as artificial intelligence and international legal frameworks for PP in a borderless online environment. This suggests that robust principles of police accountability are needed in relation to the performance of PP. Indeed, PP, like policing more generally, confronts the ‘accountability paradox’: that preventing harm will sometimes require the use of coercive power and covert practices that conflict with individual rights and the freedom of citizens. For PP to be seen to have legitimacy within communities it must be accountable in ways that ensure independent oversight, transparency in decision-making and legal compliance.

Conclusion

It is our belief that an overarching holistic framework that responds to the above six questions can contribute to meeting the need for a shared conceptual framework that allows for a transdisciplinary approach to PP. To increase the quality of how PP is understood, taught, practised and regulated, we must understand the factors that promote or hinder change towards a preventative mindset, and how knowledge, underlying assumptions and educational efforts play out in practice. Furthermore, an overarching holistic framework enables cross-departmental efforts and multi-agency partnerships because it highlights the role of the involved actors and raises ethical and regulative questions that are particularly acute if the police are expected to play an ‘upstream’ role. It also addresses the causes of problems for which the police may not be trained, where other agencies may be more appropriate, and where citizens may have

concerns about social problems being dealt with through a police-centred approach. Finally, an overarching holistic framework allows for holistic assessment of the intended, unintended and unanticipated effects and consequences of PP, enabling discussions on how to decide what constitutes human and economic ‘costs’, and whether a cost is perceived as manageable, just or legitimate.

From an educational point of view, an overarching holistic framework can inspire reflection on how our understanding of PP influences the knowledge and skills that are chosen to be a part of the curriculum, and how we teach and train. For instance, it may help us teach and train multi-agency partnerships in preventing crime with a greater sensitivity to rationalities and logics, and allow us to delineate which partnerships are relevant across different levels of prevention. From a practice perspective, an overarching holistic framework for PP draws attention to how our understandings of how PP influences the means and practices we choose to be a part of our system, and how this translates into how we approach, test, implement and evaluate specific types of PP work across different levels of prevention.

We argue that the narrow ‘crime science’ understanding of PP needs to be expanded to facilitate greater cross-departmental investment and multi-agency partnerships in the prevention of crime and wider harms. If we want to achieve progress in PP, as a field of science, policy and practice, we need to seek broader perspectives that allow for a more context- and role-sensitive understanding. A theoretical framework does not in itself solve all the challenges of the preventive turn. However, by approaching challenges in a holistic way, we may better elucidate how to prevent the problems of today as well as the ones we do not yet foresee.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank a number of researchers and practitioners from the Norwegian Police University College as well as other national and international esteemed colleagues that were involved in the initiative to establish ‘Prism – A Multidimensional Approach to Understanding and Improving Preventive Policing’, a Center of Excellence on Preventive Policing, led by Professor Inger Marie Sunde and Professor Brita Bjørkelo. The conceptualization of preventive policing developed in this article is a result of an holistic work effort that goes beyond what individual researchers educated across different disciplines can achieve alone, and is now anchored in the PREVPOL research group, led by the first author.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Hjørdis Birgitte Ellefsen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7625-6921>

Notes

1. The principles stated in the General Instruction are popularly known as the ‘Peelian principles of policing’; however, there is no empirical evidence of any link to Robert Peel and the instructions more likely were devised by the first Commissioners of Police of the Metropolis (Charles Rowan and Richard Mayne).
2. Organizational preconditions for evidence-based practice include workforce capability and skills, subject knowledge and capacity for critical thinking; workforce motivation to engage with research; and organizational support and opportunity in terms of time and access to research evidence.

References

- Andersen SN and Skardhamar T (2015) Pick a number: mapping recidivism measures and their consequences. *Crime & Delinquency* 63(5): 613–635.
- Bacchi C (2012) Why study problematizations? Making politics visible. *Open Journal of Political Science* 2(1): 1–8.
- Beck U (1986) *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Benavie A (2009) *Drugs. America's Holy War*. New York: Routledge.
- Bittner E (2005) Florence Nightingale in pursuit of Willie Sutton: a theory of the police. In: Newburn T (ed) *Policing: Key Readings*. Cullompton: Willan, pp. 150–172.
- Bjørge T (2016) *Preventing Crime. A Holistic Approach*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bland N, Calder A and Fyfe N (2021) Public policy reform and police prevention practice: a journey upstream? *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 15(3): 1882–1893.
- Bowling B, Reiner R and Sheptycki J (2019) *The Politics of the Police*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bullock K, Sidebottom A, Armitage R, et al. (2022) Police perceptions of problem-oriented policing and evidence-based policing: evidence from England and Wales. *Police Practice and Research* 23(6): 775–791.
- Castel R (1991) From dangerousness to risk. In: Burchell G, Gordon C and Miller P (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 281–298.
- Clarke RV and Cornish DB (1985) Modelling offenders' decisions. *Crime and Justice* 6: 147–185. <https://doi.org/10.1086/449106>.
- Cockbain E and Laycock G (2017) Crime science. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.4>.
- Cohen LE and Felson M (1979) Social change and crime rate trends: a routine activity approach. *American Sociological Review* 44: 588–608.
- Coote A (2012) *The Wisdom of Prevention: Long-term Planning, Upstream Investment and Early Action to Prevent Harm*. New Economics Foundation.
- Crawford A and Evans K (2017) Crime prevention and community safety. In: Leibling A, Maruna S and McAra L (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, 6th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 797–824.
- Critchley TA (1978) *A History of Police in England and Wales*, 2nd edn. London: Constable.
- den Heyer G (2021) Police strategy development: the New Zealand police prevention strategy. *Police Practice and Research* 22(1): 127–140.
- den Heyer G (2022) Evidence-based policing: a review of its adoption and use by police agencies in the United States of America. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 69: 1–10.
- Dodsworth F (2004) “Civic” police and the condition of liberty: the rationality of governance in eighteenth-century England. *Social History* 29: 199–216.
- Dodsworth F (2016) Risk, prevention and policing, c. 1750–1850. In: Crook T and Esbester M (eds) *Governing Risks in Modern Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 29–53.
- Ellefsen B (2011) Evaluating crime prevention: scientific rationality or governmentality? *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention* 12(2): 103–127.
- Ellefsen HB (2018) *The Politics of the Police and the Police of the Politics. Norwegian Police Reforms 1682–1866*. Doctoral Dissertation, PhD Thesis, University of Bergen, Norway. Available at: <https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/handle/1956/18744> (accessed 18 March 2023).
- Emsley C (2012) Marketing the brand: exporting British police models 1829–1950. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 6(1): 43–54.
- Ericson RV and Haggerty KD (1997) *Policing the Risk Society*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Felson M and Clarke RV (1998) *Opportunity Makes the Thief: Practical Theory for Crime Prevention*. USA: Home Office. Policing and Reducing Crime Unit.
- Fielding N, Bullock K and Holdaway S (2020) *Critical Reflections on Evidence-Based Policing*. London: Routledge.
- Fleming J, Fyfe N and Wingrove J (2016) ‘Evidence-informed Policing: An Introduction to EMMIE and the Crime Reduction Toolkit’: A Pilot Training Evaluation. UK: Report submitted to the College of Policing, pp. 1–90.
- Foucault M (2007) *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977–78*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Freeman R (1999) Recursive politics: prevention, modernity and social systems. *Children & Society* 13(4): 232–241.

- Fyfe NR (2016) Policing Scotland post reform: towards a shifting 'culture of control' and a new politics of policing? In: Croall H, Mooney G and Munro M (eds) *Crime, Justice and Society in Scotland*. London: Routledge, pp. 167–181.
- Fyfe NR, Terpstra J and Topsis P (2013) *Centralizing Forces: Comparative Perspectives on Contemporary Police Reform in Northern and Western Europe*. Eleven International Publishing.
- Garland D (2001) *The Culture of Control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldstein H (1979) Improving policing: a problem-oriented approach. *Crime & Delinquency* 25(2): 236–258.
- Gough I (2015) The political economy of prevention. *British Journal of Political Science* 45(2): 307–327.
- Gundhus HI (2012) Experience or knowledge? Perspectives on new knowledge regimes and control of police professionalism. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 7(2): 178–194.
- Gundhus HOI, Talberg N and Wathne CT (2022) From discretion to standardization: digitalization of the police organization. *International Journal of Police Science & Management* 24(1): 27–41.
- Härter K and Stolleis M (eds) (1996) *Repertorium der Polizeyordnungen der Frühen Neuzeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann.
- Holley C, Mutongwizo T and Shearing C (2020) Conceptualizing policing and security: new harmscapes, the anthropocene, and technology. *Annual Review of Criminology* 3(1): 341–358.
- Hood C (1991) A public management for all seasons? *Public Administration* 69(1): 3–19.
- Hughes G (1998) *Understanding Crime Prevention*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Hughes G (2007) *The Politics of Crime and Community*. Basingstokes: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hunter G, May T and Hough M (2017) *An Evaluation of the 'What Works Centre for Crime Reduction'. Final Report*. UK: Birbeck Institutional Research Online. Available at: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/21755/> (accessed 18 March 2023).
- Johnston L and Shearing C (2003) *The Governance of Security: Explorations in Policing and Justice*. London: Routledge.
- Kaufmann M and Leese M (2021) Information in-formation: algorithmic policing and the life of data. In: Završnik A and Badalič V (eds) *Automating Crime Prevention, Surveillance, and Military Operations*. Cham: Springer, pp. 69–83.
- Knemeyer F-L (2011) Polizei. In: Emsley C (ed) *Theories and Origins of the Modern Police*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 103–127.
- Korchin SJ (1976) *Modern Clinical Psychology: Principles of Intervention in the Clinic and Community*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lageson SE (2022) Criminal record stigma and surveillance in the digital age. *Annual Review of Criminology* 5(1): 67–90.
- Lawless J (2020) Against the managerial state: preventive policing as non-legal governance. *Law and Philosophy* 39: 657–689.
- Leirvik MS and Ellefsen HB (2020) «It's not us against you». Ethnicity as a resource in policing ethnic minority youths. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Policing* 7(3): 242–263.
- Loader I (2006) Policing, recognition, and belonging. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 605(1): 201–221.
- Locker J, Cotter C, Tutton A, et al. (2011) *Using Responsive Policing to Improve NZ Police Effectiveness: A Strategic Refocusing*. [Unpublished manuscript]. NZ: Otago Business School, Otago University.
- Lum C and Koper CS (2017) *Evidence-based Policing: Translating Research into Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Martinson R (1974) What works? – Questions and answers about prison reform. *The Public Interest* 35: 22–54.
- Mohammad F and Fulkerson G (2015) The “War on Drugs”: A Failed Paradigm. In: Brienen MW and Rosen JD (eds) *New Approaches to Drug Policies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 229–249.
- Mührmann-Lund J (2016) Good order and the police. *Scandinavian Journal of History* 41(1): 71–90.
- Muir R (2021) *Taking prevention seriously: the case for a crime and harm prevention system*. Strategic Review of Policing in England and Wales.
- Muir R, Higgins A, Halkon R, et al (2022) *A new mode of protection. redesigning policing and public safety for the 21st century*. The Final Report of the Strategic Review of Policing in England and Wales.
- New Zealand Police (2017) *Prevention First: National Operating Model 2017*. Available at: <https://www.police.govt.nz/sites/default/files/publications/prevention-first-2017.pdf> (accessed 18 March 2023).
- O'Malley P and Hutchinson S (2006) Reinventing prevention. Why did 'crime prevention' develop so late? *The British Journal of Criminology* 47(3): 373–389.
- Paulsen JE (2019) A values-based methodology in policing. *Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics* 13(1): 21–38.
- Peeters R (2015) The price of prevention: the preventative turn in crime policy and its consequences for the role of the state. *Punishment & Society* 17(2): 163–183.
- Petrosino A, Turpin-Petrosion C and Buehler J (2003) Scared straight and other juvenile awareness programs for preventing juvenile delinquency: a systematic review of the randomized experimental evidence. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 589(1): 41–62.
- Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 asp 8. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2012/8/contents/enacted> (accessed 18 March 2023).
- Rose N (2000) Government and control. *The British Journal of Criminology* 40(2): 321–339.
- Stokols D (1996) Translating social ecological theory into guidelines for community health promotion. *American Journal of Health Promotion* 10(4): 282–298.
- Stokols D (2018) *Social Ecology in the Digital Age. Solving Complex Problems in a Globalized World*. Cambridge: Academic Press.

- Stolleis M (2001) *Public Law in Germany 1800-1914*. New York: Berghan Books.
- Sunde IM (2020) Bør rettssikkerheten i politiets kriminalitetsforebyggende arbeid styrkes? *Tidsskrift for strafferett* 20(1): 3–5.
- Sunde N and Sunde IM (2021) Conceptualizing an AI-based police robot for preventing online child sexual exploitation and abuse. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Policing* 8(2): 1–21.
- Sunshine J and Tyler TR (2003) The role of procedural justice and legitimacy in shaping public support for policing. *Law & Society Review* 37(3): 513–548.
- Terpstra J, Fyfe NR and Salet R (2019) The abstract police: unintended consequences of organisational change of the police. *The Police Journal* 92(4): 339–369.
- Terpstra J, Salet R and Fyfe NR (2022) *The Abstract Police: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Change in Police Organisations*. Den Haag: Eleven Publishing.
- Tilley N (2009) *Crime Prevention*. Cullompton: Willan.
- Tilley N and Sidebottom A (2017) *Handbook of Crime Prevention and Community Safety*. London: Routledge.
- Weisburd D and Braga A (2019) *Police Innovation. Contrasting Perspectives*, 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zedner L (2007) Pre-crime and post-criminology? *Theoretical Criminology* 11(2): 261–281.

Author biographies

Hjørdis Birgitte Ellefsen (PhD in History) is associate professor at the Norwegian Police University College. Her field of research

is the history of the police, with focus on reforms, professionalization and politics. She leads the PREVPOL research group that aims to develop perspectives, models, theories and knowledge that can help increase the understanding and quality of preventive policing.

Brita Bjørkelo (Clinical Psychologist, PhD) is professor at the Norwegian Police University College and Oslo New University College. She is involved in research projects on whistleblowing, work environment and leadership. She leads research projects on knowledge and digitalized police practices; strain and resources in the police; diversity in police education and organization; ethics, social media and teacher education, and previously led a project on gender representation in top positions in Academe. She is an Editorial board member, and previous Editor-in-Chief of the Nordic Journal of Studies in Policing.

Inger Marie Sunde (PhD in Law) is professor at the Norwegian Police University College and the University of Bergen. She is involved in research on artificial intelligence and policing, digital evidence in procedural law, and preventive policing in a digitalized society. She leads the research group Policing in a digitized society, that aims to explore the impacts and effects of technology and digitalization on the police and the society.

Nicholas R. Fyfe (PhD in Geography) is professor at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen and the Norwegian Police University College. He is an internationally recognised researcher in the field of policing and criminal justice, with special focus on police reforms, police governance, ethics and accountability, community policing, witness protection and missing persons.