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Exploring the Contribution and Relationship to Policing and Community Safety of Volunteer Street Patrols

Adam Westall*

Abstract The pluralized policing landscape now widely involves volunteers and the voluntary sector. Volunteer street patrols (VSPs) are individuals who walk the streets of cities and towns at night. Their actions include helping those in need through acts of care, compassion, and prevention. Numerous implications exist for the volunteers who participate in this form of voluntary action, including the level to which volunteers contribute and intervene, the functions they perform within contemporary policing, and the challenges of developing and maintaining relationships with the police and other emergency services. This article argues that VSPs offer a unique and welcomed source of support to the police, providing functions the police are unable to perform. The relationship provides validity, accountability, and opportunity for the volunteers. Over reliance, increased responsibilization and challenges for volunteers delivering policing services highlight tensions in the relationship, which in turn create opportunities to develop meaningful partnerships.

Introduction

This article explores the role of volunteer street patrols (VSPs), individuals who walk the streets of cities and towns in the UK, and their contribution towards policing and community safety. It also considers the aspects of a relationship held with the police and aims to add to the growing knowledge base around volunteers and policing against the backdrop of a pluralized policing landscape. The research took place at a time when formal policing services were beginning to move towards recovery following several years of austerity. Demand for policing services has also changed offering challenges and opportunities to innovate. Accordingly,

a pluralized policing landscape exists with a stronger focus on multiple actors and agencies delivering services, once typically delivered by the state. The voluntary sector is taking an increasing role with volunteers on the streets of the UK working with and for the police. This article aims to inform policy and practice by highlighting the potential contribution and resource available from volunteers and the opportunities working with volunteers may present for the police.

Background

Familiar volunteering for the police includes Neighbourhood Watch, the Special Constabulary,

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and Police Service Volunteers (Bullock, 2014; Millie and Wells, 2019). Volunteer ‘citizen’ or street patrols are a relatively new addition, operating in support of the police. Situated within the contemporary structures of policing, VSPs are most notable in the international US example of the Guardian Angels (Kenney, 1986; Pennell *et al.*, 1986), and the UK examples of the Street Pastors or Street Angels (Bullock, 2014). In the UK, the Street Pastors were introduced in London in 1986 to address the rise in knife crime on the underground, before developing more nationally from 2003 as part of the Ascension Trust’s mission to take care, support, and kindness onto the street (Ascension Trust, 2017). The Street Angels, from their inception in 2005 in the northern UK town of Halifax, can be found walking many of the streets in the UK as well as supporting key events and locations such as festivals, train stations, or specific youth events (Christian Nightlife Initiatives, 2017). Several other examples of similar Angel groups exist in the UK and internationally (Bullock, 2014).

Nationally, the role of the voluntary and community sector (VCS hereafter) is increasing across society and in 2017/18, 166,592 voluntary organizations existed in the UK (NCVO, 2019). Although this article explores a specific form of volunteering, nationally the contribution and relevance of the VCS should not be understated. Rates of volunteering have remained stable for several years with around 19.4 million people volunteering in the UK in 2018/19 (*ibid*). The VCS is well established within the fabric and structures of society and the Criminal Justice System (CJS hereafter) (Hucklesby and Corcoran, 2016; Corcoran *et al.*, 2018; NCVO, 2019). A recent period of austerity and cuts to the CJS and policing services in England and Wales has led to an increasing role for the voluntary sector (Hucklesby and Corcoran, 2016). Policing now encompasses a diverse arena of agencies and actors, often not typically associated with the police (Loader, 2000; Millie and Bullock, 2013; Jones and Lister, 2015).

Literature review

Understanding the contemporary policing landscape

The economic climate of recent years has left public services underfunded and under financial constraint (Millie and Bullock, 2013; Lumsden and Black, 2017). For most police forces in the UK, cuts have come in the form of officer and staff reductions and a decline in non-essential services and functions, namely a reduction of around 20% to police budgets in 2014–2015 and until recently a freeze in police officer recruitment (Millie and Bullock, 2013; Unison, 2018). Demand for policing services has changed to address new forms of emerging criminality, such as trafficking, drug trading, smuggling, and cybercrime (College of Policing, 2015; Bowling *et al.*, 2019). At the local level demand now centres on public safety and welfare incidents (College of Policing, 2015; Boulton *et al.*, 2017). An opportunity exists to strengthen workforces through other sources including community involvement and citizen participation.

Jones and Lister (2015) suggest that the current pluralized policing environment is partly founded upon reductions in staff and officer numbers but also a delegation of some police functions to others in the policing arena. It is here the voluntary sector and volunteers have a significant part to play. Although voluntary action has always featured alongside public services, the community and allied organizations are now delivering services typically offered by the state (Neuberger, 2009; Bullock, 2014; Tomczak, 2014; Hucklesby and Corcoran, 2016; Corcoran *et al.*, 2018; NCVO, 2019, 2020;). Support for volunteering, in practice and policy, is found in key agencies such as the NHS, police, and public safety organizations (NCVO, 2020). Numerous challenges exist including the contested agendas between public and voluntary sectors, the blurring of boundaries of what is and is not acceptable for VCS organizations to

deliver (Milbourne, 2013), and the increased competition for funding and charity mission drift (Anheier and Salamon, 2006).

Successive UK governments have continuously promoted the wider roles and benefits for citizens and communities through localism, increased responsabilization agendas, and the rediscovery of the citizen (Garland, 2001; Millie and Bullock, 2013; Bullock, 2014). For policing, this has evidenced itself in a pluralized policing landscape (Jones and Lister, 2015) or for Loader, 'policing below the government' (Loader, 2000, p. 328). Volunteering in policing includes 'direct' volunteering such as the Special Constable or Police Service Volunteer, or 'indirect' volunteering, namely volunteering at a distance or not for the police, such as a Home Watch scheme or Street Patrols (Millie and Wells, 2019).

Volunteer street patrols

Definitions of VSP are informed by their actions, motivations, and their relationships with others. Bullock (2014) comments on the challenges of a definition by drawing from the work of Yin *et al.* (1977) and informs us that a VSP consists of interventions that are delivered by citizens or residents often centring on safety or crime prevention in residential rather than commercial areas. Bullock (2014) also suggests that several other points worthy of consideration have emerged when defining VSP. These include a patrols remit, the location of the patrol, the activities of the patrollers, the method of patrol (walking or by vehicle), and finally the actions volunteers are willing to take to address a need.

International examples such as the US Guardian Angels raise questions around the motivations of patrollers and actions they are willing to take. This US example is often referred to as a vigilante movement, established and managed for citizens to be self-proclaimed peacekeepers to address crime and incivility on the streets of several US cities (Kenney, 1986; Pennell *et al.*, 1986; Hillyer,

2017). Bullock (2014) offers a comprehensive analysis of street or citizen patrols and suggests that UK examples of VSP, namely the Street Pastors and Street Angels, consist of volunteers who participate to help address those in need within the night-time economy through supportive interventions and their presence on the street having a deterrence effect.

Research on VSP suggests the contribution volunteers make towards policing and safety varies between each volunteer group and their founding organization. It is linked to the level of intervention volunteers are willing to take (Jayne *et al.*, 2010; Bullock, 2014; Swann *et al.*, 2015). Operating within the night-time economy there is a need to promote and maintain order and civility, a constant societal and policing challenge (Crawford and Flint, 2009; Hadfield *et al.*, 2009; Bullock, 2014). Despite this challenge, limited knowledge exists around the functions of a street patrol, particularly examples outside of the Street Pastor franchise (Bullock, 2014). Nationally, within the Street Pastors, volunteers will intervene if their actions fit with the ethos and focus of providing guidance, care, and support to those in need. In other examples of VSP, actions vary (Johns *et al.*, 2009; Barton *et al.*, 2011; Bullock, 2014; Middleton and Yarwood, 2015).

Challenges of volunteers in policing

The involvement of volunteers in policing is not without its problems (Bullock, 2014). Unlike the direct example of the Special Constable, indirect volunteering in policing raises questions such as the ability of volunteers to meaningfully contribute towards policing, the level at which they participate and the role and relationship with local organizations. For the Special Constabulary and other direct examples of volunteering for the police, organizational structures and institutional governance from the police organization provide volunteers with defined ways to contribute. For indirect examples of volunteering in policing, such

as VSP, pathways and boundaries remain less defined. Nationally, the negotiation of how VSP feature within the policing and safety infrastructure presents several challenges. These centre on the role that volunteers perform or the need to licence or regulate volunteer activity in policing (Loader, 2000; Johnston, 2003). The Citizens in Policing National Board offers 'affiliation' to organizations connected to volunteering in policing, but to date the working practices of VSP are negotiated at the local level (Bullock, 2014; Citizens in Policing, 2021). Responsibility tends to fall to local policing managers where informal or mutual agreements are in place between the police and the respective VSP groups or organizations (Bullock, 2014). Volunteers may be considered as a replacement or supplement to formal policing, suggesting that local negotiation is required to define the functions of the patrol and ultimately the contribution volunteers would be able to offer (Loader, 1997; Povey, 2001; Innes, 2007; Bullock, 2014; Westall, 2020).

Cuts to policing services and the use of volunteers in the delivery of policing and community safety raise questions on the suitability of volunteers in place of the police, or in support of them (Unison, 2018). In the several examples of volunteering and policing, the support required for volunteers highlights the need for further understanding of their position (Bullock, 2014; Hucklesby and Corcoran, 2016). Indirect examples of volunteers engaged in policing need not be considered as a replacement for direct police volunteers but as individuals and groups separate from police organizations. Accountability, legitimacy, and vigilantism remain important considerations for any volunteer action on the streets. The relationship with the police offers the opportunity to explore the line between legitimate citizen action and acts of vigilantism (Williams, 2005; Sharp *et al.*, 2008; Joyce, 2011; Hoff, 2015). For Johns *et al.* (2019), there is now an argument for Street Pastors, and accordingly other VSP, to be

considered as agents and examples of policing through the state within the new right agenda.

Methodology

This article is based on data taken from an ethnographic study exploring the actions, contribution, relationships, and motivations of VSPs in a northern city in the UK from 2016 to 2017. A total of 170 h of participant observations took place with three different VSP groups, involving observation of volunteers while out on patrol, during training and meetings, and in key events in the city. Patrols normally took place between 9 pm and 3 am on a Friday and/or a Saturday evening, while volunteers supported people within the cities night-time economy. Observation lasted a full calendar year to capture the life and flow of the city, key events such as concerts, festivals, and different environmental conditions. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews took place over the last 3 months of the data collection with eight interviews involving stakeholders, including a local policing inspector responsible for the city centre; a senior paramedic with oversight of the city centre, door staff, and supervisors from two busy night-time venues; the lord mayor; and CEO of a founding VSP charity. Thirteen volunteers participated in interviews from all three VSPs along with their respective coordinators or volunteer leaders and responded to a series of questions relating to their actions, motivations, and the relationships.

At the time of the research, three distinct VSP groups operated in three key areas of the city. Each group, registered as a charity, engaged with those in need at night within the city. The background and motivations of volunteers make each group unique. The local Street Pastor group, a franchise of the national volunteer movement, volunteered on most Friday evenings. Members of this group belonged to local churches within the region and participated based on their desire to support those in need while taking the work of the church on to

the street. The local example of the Street Angels, operating on most Friday nights, belonged to the Christian Nightlife Initiative although operated separately from the network. Volunteers in this group participated in response to several fatal incidents of revellers drinking in the city at night. Connections to the city motivated the volunteers to volunteer with several living close by or growing up in the area. Many had older children who were venturing into the city's bars and clubs. The final group in this research belong to a local LGBT charity and specifically patrol the LGBT area and community of the city. Here, volunteers cited making the LGBT area safer and wanting to help those in need by identifying with issues facing the LGBT community.

Each group patrolled a different area of the city with a high concentration of shops, bars, nightclubs, transport hubs, bus and train stations, restaurants, and recreational open spaces. At night, open spaces within the city took a different role and became places of vulnerability, illicit activity, and home for many of those sleeping rough on the streets. All three groups in this research had established connections with the local policing inspector and were invited to attend the weekend police briefing for the city. Volunteers also interacted with private security companies who policed taxi ranks and venue doors and some local businesses, usually managers or staff from eateries, nightclubs, and bars.

Data were collected from all three organizations and thematically analysed throughout the research process (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Continual analysis was undertaken on the data to identify repetitions, similarities and differences, missing data, and links to theoretical perspectives (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Interview and observation data from volunteers and stakeholders are presented accordingly to demonstrate how VSP's contribute to the policing and community safety of the city when working with others.

Results

Role: walking the streets

A reassuring presence. A significant function of a VSP is the patrol element of their work. The central purpose is to walk the streets with the aim of helping others (Bullock, 2014). One of the volunteers describes their role:

There's the little stuff like giving directions or helping someone that's fallen over. You help them up or help them to a taxi. It is really needed, you can tell, it's really appreciated by a lot of people. (Volunteer)

By being on the street VSP create and maintain a presence enabling volunteers to help people and provide a source of support. Volunteers commented: 'Us just being there, I think it gives assurance' (Volunteer), and 'I know there've been incidents diffused because we've been there. Sometimes just being there helps defuse a situation and melt the tension' (Volunteer).

Walking the streets is similar to the police function of patrol. For Loader (1997), the presence of a figure or source of support is often welcomed by the public. The volunteers would always refer to their role as involving walking, talking, and helping people. On several occasions, VSP were the only visible and identifiable source of support and reassurance available to those in need. Although the background of each group in this research is different, each group can act as a form of reassurance. Volunteers suggested 'When they see us [the public] they know there's a friendly face that will help them. We walk down the street and someone will have a joke, or ask if we're well' (Volunteer). They also suggested that they reassure: 'I get the impression people feel a bit more relaxed knowing we [the volunteers] are around, we're reassuring the public' (Volunteer). Door staff from the bars also noted the work of the groups: 'On many occasions I've witnessed Street Pastors after assisting somebody stay within visual

proximity of the person they've helped to ascertain they're safe' (Door Staff). Volunteers and stakeholders talk about their presence being helpful and reassuring to those on the street. Similarities exist between VSP and the reassurance aspect of policing providing a reassuring presence available to the public (Povey, 2001; Innes, 2007).

Interactions. The interactions of VSP are different from those of the police and other emergency services. A volunteer discusses their work on the street: 'All he wanted was to have a chat, he couldn't have done that with a bouncer, the police or an ambulance person. With us [Angels] he felt he could' (Volunteer). Volunteers talked about the value of being there, 'I think just being around, just a simple thing like saying hello, giving someone a direction to their hotel or giving them help into a taxi helps the individual' (Volunteer). Interactions centre on providing support and care to those in need, something that other services sometimes struggle to deliver (Johns *et al.*, 2009; Middleton and Yarwood, 2015).

Role: acts of reducing harm and addressing vulnerability

Reducing harm. VSP walk the streets and take actions that prevent harm including speaking to people, waiting with people when alone, helping to reunite them with friends, and waiting for further support. Insight into the actions of this form of volunteering is growing (Bullock, 2014). Some of the volunteers would administer first aid, find taxis, and support people who had fallen over. Much of their work focussed on dealing with people who were intoxicated or under the influence of drugs, and the problems arising as a result. Each patrol was equipped with volunteers trained and experienced in first aid, control, and people management and communication. One of the volunteers outlines their thoughts on their role:

We give people guidance, advice and first aid without judging. We're not the

police there to arrest you, reprimand you, give you a telling off. Our job is to make sure you either get home safe, get home uninjured or your injuries are dealt with without the need to waste the resources. (Volunteer)

Volunteers would help others as much as they could and offer an additional resource different from the emergency services or local authority.

Befriending and bridging. Policing below the state is now part of the pluralized policing environment (Garland, 2001; Loader, 2000; Jones and Lister, 2015). Johns *et al.* (2019) make the argument that street patrols are substituting for the state and fulfilling roles the state typically delivers. Maintaining a relationship with the police and emergency services is important to VSP. Volunteer groups in this research maintained relationships and communicated with the local emergency services in several ways. Each group had a central contact with the police and the local ambulance service, feeding back any issues that occurred while on patrol during the following working week. Volunteers were provided with the local duty Police Sergeants and Inspectors mobile telephone number while out on patrol. For any incidents requiring immediate resolution, volunteers would call 999 and identify themselves as a VSP to the call handler.

On several occasions, VSPs would act in the absence of the emergency services by delivering first aid or by providing support. Alternatively, they would wait with members of the public until the emergency services arrived, sometimes waiting up to 1 h. Observing volunteers demonstrates the potential resource VSP have the ability to offer:

A male was on the floor having a fit. He was with a friend and it looked as though he'd taken too many drugs, despite his friend denying he'd taken anything. The Angels administered first aid and waited until the

Ambulance arrived. He was revived and sent home in a taxi, arranged by the Angels. (Observation Notes)

Several first aid interventions were given, from falling over to panic attacks or cuts to ankles. The door staff and some members of the public know the role of the Angels as primarily first aiders and secondly people here to help. (Observation Notes)

An ambulance was called with a waiting time of 1 hour 10 minutes. The patrol waited with the man who was eventually taken to hospital. They supported him, kept him warm and talked to his friend. (Observation Notes)

Waiting for the emergency services seemed a common occurrence throughout the research. Volunteers were often the only people to support and befriend somebody in trouble. Support from emergency services was requested when volunteers were unable to help and cancelled if the person recovered.

The role of VSP sees them supporting rather than replacing the emergency services. Volunteers tend not to regard themselves as extensions of the police or the ambulance service but welcome and acknowledge their supporting role: 'We are not the police, certainly not the paramedics and we are not the door staff' (Volunteer). They identify the need to be independent: 'We are certainly not a policing service, our credibility rests on us not being the police, it rests on us being that bridge' (Volunteer). Unlike direct volunteering such as the Special Constabulary, VSP's offer something different. For the Street Pastors identifying as a volunteer was significant: 'We help people, we chat to people and we listen. We do not police!' (Volunteer). The unique nature of each group, supported by their respective charities, influenced their contribution and created an independent resource available to the police and others in delivering safety.

Volunteers act as a bridge between the emergency services and the public. On occasion they

reduced demand as their involvement lessened the need to call the police or the ambulance: 'We're there for the in between bit rather than the police and the ambulance' (Volunteer). For [Johns et al. \(2019\)](#), VSP offers a means of freeing up police and ambulance time. Volunteers and Stakeholders talk about their role:

We're like the extras. It's nice to have a group who can intervene for people who don't necessarily need an ambulance. Maybe they just need someone to sit with them until they're sober. It's better we do it than the police. (Volunteer)

The volunteers act as a bridge almost between the people who are using the city and the police and other emergency services - the door staff, the venues. (Representative for the Police and Crime Commissioner)

Volunteers support in addition to or in the absence of the police. This is how volunteers regard their contribution towards community safety on the streets by helping the public and the police.

Despite supporting the police, the level at which each volunteer group were willing to intervene differed, in particular the Street Pastors ([Middleton and Yarwood, 2015](#)). Volunteers in this group tended to rely on the emergency services more so than others. This is linked to their stricter ethos around caring for others through kindness, communication, and faith ([Isaac and Davies, 2009](#); [Johns et al., 2009, 2019](#); [Middleton and Yarwood, 2015](#)). Soft interventions, such as handing out water, flip-flops, and sweets, were common. Pastors would then support those in need through conversation, guidance, and monitoring: 'Being able to sit with someone and listen, maybe help practically, encourage people and share some hope. For me that's what it's really about' (Volunteer). Religion, faith, and prayer also featured as a contribution offered by this VSP. Pastors would regularly pray for somebody after speaking to them or with them. Observing the

group suggests a difference in the approach taken to care on the street:

As we walked up the street one of the Pastors commented on forgetting to say a prayer. The group stopped at the side of the road and huddled in a circle. Two of the senior volunteers said a prayer about the hopes for the evening. (Observation Notes)

Interventions were never ones of apprehension. Within this group's ethos and aims, the Street Pastor movement outlines their stance around intervening only when necessary, evident in this research. Volunteers are willing to intervene but not at the expense of compromising the principles of the group (Barton *et al.*, 2011).

Relationship: the challenge of governance

Volunteers are a feature of the local community safety landscape (Pennell *et al.*, 1986; Bullock, 2014). VSP in this research work with the local police force and the relationship is welcomed. The police featured in the routine planning, delivery of services and maintenance for each group. In this research, the local policing inspector was a key contact and confidante for volunteer groups: 'The Angels and the Street Pastors are one of a number of groups of people who will be asked to support us in looking after people on nights out' (Local Police Inspector). Nationally, local governance and support tends to fall under the local or community policing provision as was also the case in this research (NPIA, 2010; Bullock, 2014).

Differences exist nationally in the way VSP work with the police (Isaac and Davies, 2009; Bullock, 2014). In this research, patrols were offered the opportunity to attend the nightly weekend police briefing, which helped to establish and maintain relationships and cooperation with key agencies:

For the last four years I've worked with those teams, we've provided

different sorts of support and what those groups together allowed us to do is make the holes on that safety net on a Friday and Saturday night that little bit smaller. (Local Police Inspector)

Volunteers and their actions provide something different from the traditional police provision when addressing the challenges of policing the night-time economy (Hadfield *et al.*, 2009). Referred to as an extra tool in the policing tool kit, an increased network of actors and organizations in the policing and community safety infrastructure was welcomed and allowed the police to fill the gaps they may not normally be able to (Garland, 2001; Jones and Lister, 2015).

Local relationships with the police offered a governance structure for the VSP and their work in the city. The patrols provided reassurance where the police could not (Innes, 2007). Relationships existed based on mutual support with the local police officer showing understanding about resourcing and how they could work together: 'They [VSP] free up a lot of time for police officers, and they're a really valuable tool to be used at the weekend. We often see the same faces' (Local Police Officer). The local Inspector also felt similar:

What the Angels allow us to do is provide a different sort of intervention, because sometimes if someone is particularly stressed or agitated, a yellow jacket, a big custodian helmet, the handcuffs, might provide some barriers. (Local Police Inspector)

Volunteers were considered by the local police as a useful and unique resource in the policing of the city.

Attending the weekly weekend police briefing meant volunteers had insight into the plans for policing activities that evening. This local arrangement gave the volunteers unique access to the police. For two of the groups, attendance was built

into their own patrol briefing. The police Inspector and a volunteer discuss this arrangement: 'We've always tried to include all of the projects in our briefings. We have a structured briefing on a Friday and Saturday night that they can attend' (Local Police Inspector). Volunteers also valued this arrangement: 'It makes sense for the Angels to be properly embedded within the briefing structure. Although there may be issues with it, it's actually important we go' (Volunteer). Volunteers, in this example, have a relatively unique access to a side of policing that other agencies and volunteers do not. Attending helped them develop and maintain their relationship with the police.

Despite police support, the charitable status of each group suggested patrols could operate independently of the police (Bullock, 2014; Middleton and Yarwood, 2015). A relationship with the police was not without difficulties from the volunteers' perspective: 'You just sometimes seem to be sitting there and it's all aimed at the police. Sometimes you get a nod in your direction and that's it' (Volunteer). 'I find it [working with the police] great, I find it quite interesting' (Volunteer). 'I think by and large I've had positive experiences with the police' (Volunteer). Several volunteers commented on the positive and negative experiences of attending police briefings. For some, it appeared as though the police did not know enough about the work of the volunteers and chose not to talk about them. For others, the value in attending was acknowledged despite some frustrations.

Accountability. Working with the police offered VSP a form of accountability and structure. Despite individual frustrations and tensions, being acknowledged and supported by the local policing teams provided volunteers with a sense of formalization and acknowledgement to their presence and contributions. The CEO of one of the founding charities describes some of the benefits to the relationship:

The police briefing gives them validation. It makes them feel important

and involved. It makes them feel they belong and are part of a team and that's important. If it's important to them it's important to me. (CEO-Founding Charity)

Being 'validated' created feelings of belonging in the volunteers. It added a layer of legitimacy and confirmation towards their actions by being part of a team that included the police (Joyce, 2011; Hoff, 2015). It gives VSP a place in the policing of the city at night.

The pluralized policing landscape sees many agencies and actors now taking on the tasks formally delivered and provided by the state and its agencies (Garland, 2001; Bullock, 2014; Jones and Lister, 2015). Often responsibility for those on the street fell to the local police, holding them accountable for provisions available in the city. Relationships with the police help to negate the issue of vigilantism sometimes attached to VSP (Williams, 2005). The local inspector highlights the need to ensure awareness of who is on the streets:

For me, the briefing is this kind of clock on and clock off thing. Because I do feel I have a responsibility to look after them [the volunteers], which is why I ask them to send me a text when it's all done at the end of the night. (Local Police Inspector)

Maintaining relationships and working together is important. It offers opportunities for mutual support, networks, and some accountability and governance structures.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored the role and contribution of VSPs within policing and community safety, namely as an additional resource available to provide support and assistance to those in need on the street. VSP offer a different level of support than the emergency services, particularly for policing

within the night-time economy (Hadfield *et al.*, 2009). In presenting this research, key themes have emerged that include a contribution to safety and policing through presence and reassurance and interactions focussed on reducing harm. In working with others, VSP act as a bridge between the public and the emergency services and are a valued and additional resource to the local policing team. The themes suggested here add to the growing knowledge on VSP while highlighting the importance of research, which explores examples of volunteering in and for the police (Bullock, 2014).

VSP have largely been presented as positive examples of volunteering in policing and are argued as a vital and valuable resource in the policing landscape. They offer something different from the direct examples of police volunteers although challenges and limitations exist. VSP support others through their presence and the creation of reassurance when none or little is available. Members of the public were largely reassured by having a friendly face or charity representative available to them. However, the capacity in which volunteers can support the public remains important. For 'softer' or minor interventions, the role of the VSP can be helpful. For more challenging cases of need or intervention, it remains difficult to generalize and provide a standard approach. A standardized approach from the perspective of governance would be beneficial to frame the actions volunteers may be expected to deliver. However, standardizing the approach or establishing set boundaries runs the risk of suppressing the unique interventions they can provide. A need to outline how VSP operate in the night-time economy is needed. Despite this, a wider argument remains in the increasing role of the voluntary sector and specifically VSP as a provider of policing services and community safety services (Hucklesby and Corcoran, 2016; Johns *et al.*, 2019).

VSP offer two distinct forms of support to the police and emergency services, befriending and bridging. Befriending, arguably a form of reassurance, is also a means of reducing harm and vulnerability (Povey, 2001; Innes, 2007). On several

occasions in this research, the role of volunteers was to wait with people until they were able to support themselves or safely make their way home. Changes to contemporary policing mean the police have limited capacity to support those in need. This aspect of safety is vital in the night-time economy and presently not fully supported by state-led resources. While this study cannot directly provide an account of reductions in levels of vulnerability, the actions of volunteers support and assist people in staying safe. VSP contribute when help and support is not available and do so in a non-judgemental caring role (Middleton and Yarwood, 2015).

Acting as a bridge between the public and the emergency services is a further function of the VSP. Usually combined with acts of befriending, VSP offer a means of freeing up police time by intervening to help those in need when state services are not available. This often means waiting with a person or monitoring the situation and providing support until emergency services arrive. Arguably, a role usually fulfilled by the police from a safety and well-being perspective. Acting as a bridge is a key contribution and valuable tool to policing. However, volunteers have no powers and have little ability to control a situation should the need arise. There is a risk that a situation, especially when alcohol or drugs may be present, may escalate. VSP often waited for considerable amounts of time for the arrival of support. Although volunteers consider themselves as the extras, different to the police, it is important to reaffirm that wider responsibilization narratives raise the issue of volunteers taking on the role of the state (Garland, 2001; Hucklesby and Corcoran, 2016; Corcoran *et al.*, 2018; Johns *et al.*, 2019).

Both nationally and locally an important relationship exists with the police. It provides support for volunteers, guidance if needed and opportunities to develop practice and skills. This research has highlighted that this relationship also provides opportunities for accountability from both perspectives. Volunteers suggest tensions to the relationship, arguably connected to their lack of desire to be seen as the police or associated with them.

VSP are independent of the state and were founded by and belong to the respective charitable organizations. Despite the growing role of the VCS in the CJS and wider society, volunteers deliver unique and innovative services, which may become blurred if aligned too closely to police or other agendas (Hucklesby and Corcoran, 2016; Corcoran *et al.*, 2018). In an attempt to improve and enhance clarity and collegiality for VSP, this article suggests a local governance framework, comprising of several agencies and actors in addition to the police, may be advantageous.

Accountability when engaged in the policing and community safety landscape is important and the relationship with the police goes some way in helping VSP to achieve it. VSP find themselves taking on roles traditionally provided by the police and emergency services (Garland, 2001; Bullock, 2014; Jones and Lister, 2015) and it is important volunteers are supported and given validation in order to be able to undertake the wider responsabilization ideals placed upon them (Garland, 2001). Working with the consent of the police gives legitimacy to the role (Joyce, 2011; Hoff, 2015). However, VSP are not the police and it remains paramount to acknowledge that structures and operations do not need to follow those of the traditional police organization (Hoff, 2015). The provision offered by VSP is different from that of the police despite the similarities. A balance is required to create opportunities for pluralized providers to be involved in policing and community safety while acknowledging the limitations volunteers face. Significant opportunity exists to work in partnership with the voluntary sector in policing through mutual coordinated and resourced opportunities.

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