



Guest Editorial

Policing Vulnerable People in Island Contexts: Introduction to the Special Issue

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This special issue of the *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* is dedicated to exploring the work being done to understand, improve, and critique the policing of vulnerable people in various island contexts. The special issue came about through an initial email exchange followed by a discussion between the guest co-editors at our first meeting across time zones. At the time, we had each co-edited special issues on policing in the Pacific (Watson & Howes, 2022) and policing and justice in the Caribbean (Wallace & Neptune-Figaro, 2023), respectively. In discussing our experiences, we noted that there had been increased research on policing in island contexts generally. However, the second editor (Wallace) observed that there had been limited exposition on the policing of vulnerable persons in island jurisdictions specifically. As we discussed the proposal of the special issue together and with colleagues, the journal editorial team, and potential reviewers, we found a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement about the possibilities for exploring this topic. It had the potential to open our eyes to new knowledge from a range of island contexts worldwide, and to bring together diverse bodies of research. It would reflect a criminology of the margins and, more specifically, of islands.

In developing the special issue, we asked: “What is being done to improve the policing of vulnerable people in island contexts?” We invited authors to share context-rich examples of research on the particular challenges (and solutions) in policing vulnerable people in island contexts. As with the broader mission of the journal, this special issue is informed by southern theory (Connell, 2007) and southern criminology (Carrington et al., 2016; Carrington et al., 2018). It therefore aims to contribute to democratising knowledge by sharing scholarship from the peripheries and the margins. Islands, like rural areas, tend to be peripheral to the metropole or centre, even in countries of the Global North. In countries of the Global South, islands may even be described as “the periphery of peripheries” (Scott & Staines, 2021, p. 595).

The special issue includes articles drawn not only from the Pacific Islands and the Caribbean but also from Europe and Southeast Asia. We note that criminology is invigorated by emerging work in conceptual and theoretical development in some of these regions; for example, Asian criminology (Lee & Laidler, 2013; Liu, 2009, 2016), Pacific criminology (Faleolo & Forsyth, 2024), and Caribbean criminology (Wallace, 2024a). Each of these areas of criminological scholarship highlights the shared cultural values and experiences of the region of focus and points to their potential to contribute unique insights and practices to criminology globally. These approaches also each acknowledge that, under their umbrellas, a one-size-fits-all approach is neither possible nor desirable, given the diversity (e.g., cultural, linguistic, and economic) *within* the regions themselves (see, e.g., Forsyth et al., 2020; Lee & Laidler, 2013; Wallace, 2024b). While these emerging criminologies are important for the work contained in the special issue, the organising principle that unites the articles is their status as islands and their focus on

the policing of vulnerable people. Before introducing the articles, we briefly discuss the conceptual and theoretical background to the special issue, focusing on policing vulnerable people and island criminology.

Policing Vulnerable People

Our approach to understanding the policing of vulnerable people is informed by the work of Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron (2021). It is relevant to consider four forms of vulnerability in relation to policing (Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021, pp. 19–25). First, *ontological* vulnerability, refers to the vulnerability that we all share as an inherent part of the human condition. Second, *individual* vulnerabilities are associated with membership in marginalised groups, based on a wide range of potentially intersecting characteristics. These characteristics include gender and sexual identity, Indigeneity, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, health, and mental health. It is this form of vulnerability that has been the focus among police organisations. Third, *situational* vulnerability is associated with circumstances, such as experiences of crime, whether as a victim, witness, or offender. Finally, *system-generated* (or iatrogenic) vulnerabilities, refer to the negative impacts of the policing process on persons interacting with the police. Additionally, it is important to recognise that police officers and related practitioners can be vulnerable in the same ways as other community members, not only ontologically and individually but also situationally, because of the nature of their work (Asquith & Barkowiak-Théron, 2021).

It has long been recognised that the role of policing extends beyond the enforcement of laws to the maintenance of social order and keeping the peace (see, e.g., Bittner, 1967). Further, the emerging field of policing and public health recognises that police officers are increasingly involved as the first port of call in responding to a broad range of matters of health and public safety (Southby & del Pozo, 2022; van Dijk & Crofts, 2017). Unmet needs and gaps in the system mean that police officers are called upon to respond to social problems that require resources and expertise beyond policing (Southby & del Pozo, 2022; Wood et al., 2021), a challenge that is even more pronounced in countries of the Global South (see, e.g., Wallace, 2019). The expanded role of policing further explains why police officers are often in contact with vulnerable people. In turn, vulnerable people are more likely to encounter a fundamental and defining tension of policing (Innes, 2004), which suggests that “the police protect us from crime, but that they also intrude into our lives” (Jackson & Bradford, 2009, p. 494), even for matters seemingly unrelated to crime and justice.

Internationally, the policing of vulnerable people is a key human rights concern (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2015; INTERPOL, 2023). Police officers have a role as knowledge brokers and agents of change in the implementation of a human rights approach (Howes et al., 2021). A human rights approach to policing eschews discrimination and bias. Accordingly, democratic policing values uphold the notion of equality before the law and specify that police are obliged to protect all citizens equally without discrimination (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2008). Various international instruments inform the policing of vulnerable people in ways that uphold human rights (Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011). However, in practice worldwide, there is a wealth of examples of differential policing that suggest that this aim is far from being achieved. For example, research from critical criminological perspectives has analysed the use, misuse, and abuse of state power exercised through coercive powers and state-sanctioned use of force (or violence) by police, noting that it is disproportionately against members of marginalised groups (see, e.g., Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Ellis, 2021). Crucially, it is not only overpolicing that is an issue but also underpolicing. When members of the same marginalised groups need police assistance, they may routinely find inadequate support (see, e.g., Buxton-Namisnyk, 2022; Russell, 2019).

These facts necessitate policing approaches to better support vulnerable people. Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron (2021) argue that police should anticipate that any interaction may involve a person who is vulnerable for one or more reasons. Further, police organisations should adopt a universal precautions model, like the health sector, to ensure that an appropriate duty of care is embedded into policing policy and practice. This is particularly so in initial police contact and at key stages of the policing process, such as “caution, custody reception, interviewing, and detention” (Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021, p. 30).

Island Criminology

The fair, safe, and effective policing of vulnerable people presents an array of challenges for police officers and organisations worldwide. However, island jurisdictions can face particular challenges, such as smallness; resource limitations; relative isolation; and legacies of colonisation, slavery, and conflict. These challenges can have implications for the policing of vulnerable people in island contexts. Conceptual and theoretical approaches have emerged that place the focus on islands. For those who live on islands or are part of the diaspora, islands can be rich in cultural knowledge, language, meaning, and practices; they can be places of home, healing, and resilience (Scott & Staines, 2021; Suaalii-Sauni & Lauganiu, 2024). However, as

islands have long been mythologised and associated with both promise and threat, utopia and dystopia, or idylls and horrors, they are often regarded by outsiders as a curiosity or a sought-after tourist destination. Both insiders and outsiders may view islands with nostalgia for a slower and less development-centred lifestyle (Kallis et al., 2022; Ronström, 2021; Scott & Staines, 2021).

Researchers from a range of domains have debated the definition of *islandness* or what is common to islands and island identity, with a range of conceptions in use (Foley et al., 2023). Physically or geographically, beyond being surrounded by water, they are often considered remote, small, secluded, or isolated spaces on the margins (Foley et al., 2023; Ronström, 2021), although that perception may differ depending on their relationship with and proximity to an archipelago or a mainland or continental state (Baldacchino, 2020). Researchers have explored islands as “relational spatialities grounded in unique kinesthetic performances” (Vannini & Taggart, 2013, p. 228) and as a typology of narrative themes of relationships with both the island and the people, which are reproduced intergenerationally (Waite, 2022). From a social psychological perspective, islandness on very small islands has been found to include interdependence among community members which results in vulnerabilities when the composition of the community changes and reduced access to services when key personnel relocate (Matheson et al., 2024).

Island criminology, as proposed by Scott and Staines (2024), is a recent addition to the theoretical and conceptual toolkit. Island criminology builds upon southern criminology (and other criminologies of the margins) and islandness, and it highlights the relevance of rural criminology. Reflecting southern criminology (Carrington et al., 2016), island criminology recognises islands as part of the periphery for their physical, practical, and psychological distance from the metropole (Scott & Staines, 2024). In examining the peripheries, island criminology also reflects Indigenous criminology, which critically analyses how the power relations associated with colonisation, conflict, and oppression have continued impacts in the present, incorporating activism to address these impacts (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Tauri & Cunneen, 2024). Island criminology also has affinities with the broad discipline of geography. Reflecting the concept of islandness, both the geographical features of islands (*space*) and the cultural and social features (*place*) are relevant to island criminology (Scott & Staines, 2024, p. 12). Due to conceptual similarities and overlaps, island criminology can build on and re-purpose ideas from rural criminology to examine places that are often small and relatively isolated from the metropole. It can do so by analysing the *ecology* or “relationship between the people and the environment of a place” (Scott & Staines, 2021, p. 580).

In discussing their vision for island criminology, Scott and Staines (2024) discuss six concepts that reflect elements of islandness: idylls (and horrors), isolation, invasion, integration, insularity, and industry. These concepts suggest many potentially fruitful avenues for analysis, such as belonging and exclusion, hybridity of justice systems, and local challenges and solutions. In particular, the tropes of islands as places of idylls and horrors cannot be ignored. Historically, as Scott and Staines (2021) document, many examples exist of horrors—and exclusion—on islands, including their use, mainly in the nineteenth century, as part of the penal policy of transportation. This trope of horror resurfaces in accounts of islands as carceral spaces where vulnerable people, variously described as asylum seekers, irregular maritime arrivals, or undocumented migrants, are detained as they await processing (Scott & Staines, 2021). The horrors of mandatory immigration detention have long been discussed as a human rights disaster in Australia.¹ Similar horrors are now also unfolding in Europe. For example, in the Canary Islands—a Spanish archipelago located off the coast of northwestern Africa—reception centres now hold those wishing to enter Spain and increased border controls deny access to continuing the journey without documentation, including residency permits (Gazzotti, 2024).

However, for island criminology, Scott and Staines (2021) suggest that the goal is not to mythologise islands as idylls or horrors. Rather, there are two key areas of potential for criminologists. The first is analysing how crime is constructed and interpreted in islands as distinct social and cultural places. The second is analysing how the geography of these spaces produces distinct social networks, norms, and social controls. Scott and Staines (2021, 2024) recognise the need for—and invite others to contribute to—the development of island criminology.

Articles of the Special Issue

The eight articles of the special issue set about answering the question of “What is being done to improve the policing of vulnerable people in island contexts?” In doing so, they provide context-rich insights into policing vulnerability in distinct island contexts. They discuss a range of individual, situational, and system-generated vulnerabilities (Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021). In some of the articles, the focus is on policing as the remit of the state police organisation, while in others, it is conceptualised more broadly to encompass other agencies with policing functions. Reflecting southern criminology, the articles are drawn from diverse island contexts, mostly on “the periphery of peripheries” (Scott & Staines, 2021, p. 595). All reflect the values of a democratic approach to policing that respects the human rights of vulnerable people. They draw from a

diverse range of theoretical and conceptual tools for analysis. Some have adopted or adapted theories of the Global North to the context of the Global South. Others have engaged with criminologies of the margins or explicitly considered geographic elements of space (e.g., smallness and resource limitations) or social and cultural elements of place (e.g., relative isolation and legacies of colonisation).

Police Officers' Attitudes and Strategies for Wellbeing

The ways that police officers go about their work affects the vulnerable people involved, the police officers and organisation, and the wider community. The first article focuses on police officers' attitudes towards diversity, which is important for how police officers engage with vulnerable people. The second focuses on police officers' own vulnerability due to the nature of their work.

In the first article, we travel to the Nordic country of Iceland at the northwestern periphery of Europe, where **Eyrún Eyþórsdóttir and Margrét Valdimarsdóttir** consider the attitudes of police recruits towards diversity. The article provides a helpful overview of scholarship on policing individual vulnerabilities, such as minority ethnic status and LGBT+ status. It describes how the Icelandic context, which was previously characterised by high ethnic homogeneity, reflecting relative isolation, has more recently been characterised by rapidly increasing ethnic diversity. Noting that Icelandic police recruits now receive university education, the article reports that increased social diversity on a range of characteristics is not yet reflected in the composition of the police. Eyþórsdóttir and Valdimarsdóttir's analysis of six years of survey data shows varying support amongst the police recruits for education on diversity and representative diversity in policing. They highlight that more is needed in policy and practice for the police organisation to keep pace with social change and engage in the policing of vulnerable people appropriately.

The second article takes us to the Pacific, where **Soro Ramacake and Julian Lawakeli** consider the vulnerability of police officers themselves in Fiji, which has a hybrid justice system as a legacy of colonisation. The researchers explore police officers' own vulnerability, by examining specifically the impacts of workplace stressors on psychological, emotional, and physical wellbeing. Importantly, contributing to Pacific Criminology, they also consider a holistic worldview and identify culturally specific concepts and practices that may impact approaches to policing and to police officers' coping with work-related stress. Drawing on survey data, Ramacake and Lawakeli show that police officers are regularly exposed not only to pressure and overwork but also to traumatic incidents that have tangible impacts on their wellbeing. This reflects situational vulnerabilities, which have the potential to impact on police officers and the vulnerable people who are policed (Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021). The findings reveal a range of strategies for coping reported by participants, with cultural involvement and community-based engagement offering promising ways forward.

Policing Young People and Justice-Involved People

We then turn our attention to research on efforts to improve the policing of groups recognised as particularly vulnerable: children and young people, and justice-involved people.

In the third article, **Dylan de Gourville** explores the policing of children and young people, referring to the challenges for small island developing states in the Caribbean, such as smallness and colonial legacies. He first reviews the literature on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the policing of young people, noting the potential for vulnerabilities brought about by policing approaches, or system-generated vulnerabilities (Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021). To better address this issue, he discusses the potential for trauma-informed policing. Focusing on Trinidad and Tobago, de Gourville reports the findings from interviews with children and young people to gain insights from their perspectives on police interactions. Their words illustrate vivid recollections of encounters with the police. Themes include profiling and stigmatisation, harassment and abuse, and lack of compassion and understanding. The article argues for the need for trauma-informed policing to be adopted for the Caribbean context, underpinned by empirical research in the Caribbean region and its diverse island contexts.

In the fourth article, we journey to the island country of Singapore in Southeast Asia. Here, **Daryl W. Yang** begins with examples from media that suggest a suicide risk for justice-involved persons following interactions with the police. Such incidents occur even when police act according to legal requirements. Using a legal epidemiology approach, Yang considers the Singaporean context of policing and analyses its legal regulation, which reflects its colonial legacy. He draws on legislation and specific cases to discuss vulnerability at key points in the policing process, such as arrest and interrogation, where justice-involved people may be particularly vulnerable and a duty of care is warranted. Yang's analysis shows how the responsibility for risk is not that of individual justice-involved people but rather of the system and the institution of policing more broadly. The article thus provides an example of analysis of system-generated vulnerabilities (Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021). It highlights the need for changes to legislation and policing guidelines to keep justice-involved people safe.

Policing Gender-Based Violence and Sex Trafficking

Next, we consider the policing of pervasive issues worldwide: gender-based violence and sex trafficking. This violence invokes both individual and situational vulnerabilities (Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021). Understanding the social and historical context is crucial for understanding the challenges of addressing the issues in particular island contexts.

In the fifth article, **Cush Sewell Lewis and Stacy-Ann Wilson** examine the policing of both victims and perpetrators of intimate partner violence in Jamaica, a small island developing state in the Caribbean. The researchers discuss how slavery associated with the plantation economy had profound negative impacts on the Black Caribbean population—a legacy that cannot be ignored when considering the high rates of normalised violence in the present day. Discussing initiatives for policing intimate partner violence, the researchers note that the state police organisation is itself inherited from a colonial past and is subject to limited resources. The researchers report the findings from interviews with police officers and compare Jamaica's domestic violence legal framework with those of other Caribbean countries. They identify practical and legislative barriers to effective policing of intimate partner violence. The article suggests ways forward, including implementing a problem-oriented policing framework to more effectively address intimate partner violence.

In the sixth article, we head to Southeast Asia to the small island developing state of Timor-Leste, where **Loene Howes and Suzanne Preston** explore the implementation of gender-responsive policing. As a relatively recently independent country, Timor-Leste's history of colonisation, occupation, and conflict have left a legacy of high rates of gender-based violence. The article explores how gender advisory work is done through a partnership between Timor-Leste and Australia to foster gender equality, strengthen capability to respond to gender-based violence, and support vulnerable victims. With a program design based on relevant strategic plans and guiding documents from both countries, the role of the gender advisor is to work collaboratively with counterparts and a range of agencies to implement initiatives that contribute to strategic objectives. These include improving the policing of vulnerable people. The article provides examples of some of the key initiatives implemented in the fourth iteration of the program. To generate positive changes with limited resources, the authors highlight the importance of interagency collaboration and organisational commitment.

In the seventh article, we consider the case of Cyprus in the southeastern peripheries of Europe. Here, **Angelo Constantinou** examines the policing of sex trafficking at the southeastern front of the European Union (EU). He provides an overview of the European legislative context for trafficking. He also discusses the context of Cyprus, located at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Europe, noting that its history of colonisation, status as a site of international troops, and tourist identity have contributed to present circumstances. To understand approaches to combating trafficking, he reports the findings from interviews with practitioners from a range of relevant organisations, involved at different stages of the justice process. Themes include resource limitations for agencies, inadequate training for practitioners at each phase of the process, a lack of coordination, and inadequate support for victims. These issues present system-generated vulnerabilities (Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021) for victims. In response to the gaps identified, Constantinou presents a series of practical implications to improve the response throughout the system.

Policing Migrants and Asylum Seekers in Island Detention

In the final section, we consider the use of islands to detain vulnerable people seeking asylum in the EU. The fact that some of the detention islands are also tourist destinations invokes the trope of island idylls and horrors (Scott & Staines, 2021) and warrants urgent critical analysis.

In the eighth article, **Julia Manek, Sophia Popp, and Amanda Oiza Bucknor** examine the use of the island of Samos—the first of five Greek islands along the west coast of Türkiye—to house mandatory immigration detention facilities at the southeastern peripheries of Europe. The researchers note that this closed controlled access centre (CCAC) is part of the EU's policy which requires the containment of migrants and involves a range of police and security actors. Reflecting the category of system-generated harms (Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2021), the researchers take a critical approach, defining vulnerability as deliberate exposure of particular groups to harm. They draw from border criminologies and human geography employing a novel method to map the psychological and geographical elements of control from the forced camp residents' perspectives. This mapped data is supplemented by interviews with human rights defenders. What emerges is a powerful account of how people seeking asylum are made more vulnerable and less safe as migration is securitised. The researchers call for further critical engagement to combat this serious human rights issue.

Conclusion

This special issue was developed with the aim of answering the question, “What is being done to improve the policing of vulnerable people in island contexts?” A special issue can provide only a partial answer to this question. However, the answer, partial as it is, opens windows into eight examples from Cyprus, Fiji, Iceland, Jamaica, Samos (Greece), Singapore, Timor-Leste, and Trinidad and Tobago. Through these windows, we gain snapshots in time of the work happening in these specific island contexts to understand, improve, and critique the policing of vulnerable people. The articles in the special issue share a focus on promoting policing that respects human rights of diverse community members, recognising that vulnerability is not limited to a particular form. While some of the articles document new initiatives that aim to enhance human rights, others highlight current practices in need of reform to ensure the protection of human life, human dignity, and human rights. The scholarship presented has relevance across disparate police jurisdictions and social milieus and the context provided in each one facilitates understanding and comparison across different contexts. We are delighted to introduce the special issue. We hope that it stimulates further academic research and debate on island criminology and the policing of vulnerable people in island contexts.

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¹ The Australian Government has had a controversial policy of mandatory immigration detention since 1992. From 2001, external territories of Australia, most notably Christmas Island, were used (although not continuously) to detain asylum seekers (until 2023). The offshore detention policy has included the Pacific Island countries of Nauru and Papua New Guinea (Manus Island), again, not continuously. The facility at Manus Island closed in 2017, when 690 men were still detained (Refugee Council of Australia, 2024).

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