OXFORD

Uncomfortable knowledge, the production of ignorance, and the trustworthiness of UK policing

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we draw on emerging theories of the production of ignorance in organizations. We conduct a qualitative analysis of two forms of secondary data on policing in England and Wales: first, documents in the public domain from the Casey Review and the Angiolini Inquiry; second, qualitative data collected as part of 'Operation Soteria' a UK Home Office-funded programme designed to improve the investigation of rape and serious sexual offences. We highlight the adverse effects of avoidance of uncomfortable knowledge, organizational silence, and non-learning in policing. We argue that they are both important contributors to the crisis of legitimacy faced by UK policing, and barriers to effective change. Finally, we discuss structural conditions that support the production and reproduction of ignorance and approaches to 'undoing ignorance'.

In March 2021, Sarah Everard was abducted, raped, and murdered by a serving officer in the Metropolitan Police Service. Reports of his arrest resulted in a victim of another police officer coming forward; this officer was subsequently convicted of eighty-five serious offences, including forty-eight rapes. Both perpetrators used their positions as police officers to facilitate their crimes. Serious crimes committed by police officers continued to come to light. These events have contributed to a legitimacy crisis for UK policing, with significant falls in public trust and confidence in the police (Kirk 2022). Subsequent reviews have highlighted major failures in: acting on available information, learning from prior reviews, and the willingness to speak out about serious misconduct because of fear of reprisals and beliefs that nothing would be done (Casey 2023; Angiolini 2024).

Researchers have long been interested in how knowledge is acquired, produced, and used in organizations. However, in the last two decades, there has been increasing interest in the ways in which ignorance is produced, reproduced, and used (Gross and McGoey 2015; McGoey 2016; Smithson 2022). Researchers and theorists have begun to study questions such as how uncomfortable knowledge is avoided (Rayner 2012); how silence is produced (Morrison and Milliken 2000); how ignorance is used strategically for the avoidance of blame (McGoey 2012), and the conditions in which non-learning occurs (Brunsson 1998; Jalonen 2023). However, to date, ignorance in organizations and the structural conditions that underpin the production and

reproduction of ignorance remain much less studied than the production and use of knowledge. A burgeoning literature on knowledge management and the production and use of knowledge in evidence-based policing (see e.g. Mitchell and Huey 2018) has yet to be matched by serious attention to the production and use of ignorance in policing organizations.

In this study, we draw on secondary data to argue that the systematic production of ignorance has contributed to a loss of trustworthiness in parts of UK policing. We argue that the factors identified risk preventing successful strategic change that could restore trustworthiness and public confidence.

In the next section, we set out the prior theory and research on which we build, followed by an overview of the data and applied methodology. We discuss findings thematically before concluding with an overview of the approaches that may be productive in addressing harmful ignorance in organizations.

THE PRODUCTION OF IGNORANCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

Some forms of deliberate ignorance have positive impacts. For example, the principle that 'justice is blind' represents the belief that justice should be impartially determined on the facts of the case and not regarding factors such as wealth, power, or social background. Despite evidence that these principles often fail

(see e.g. Brewer and Heitzeg 2008), this form of ignorance is generally held to be positive.

However, many forms of organizational ignorance have pernicious consequences. It is these forms of ignorance and the means of their production that we focus on below, paying attention to those that seem most salient to policing organizations.

Avoidance of uncomfortable knowledge

One important strand of ignorance studies concerns the avoidance of 'uncomfortable knowledge' (Rayner 2012). Rayner calls on us to look at those things that institutions 'know' to be true, but where that knowledge has either not been assimilated throughout an organization, or where it is ignored in daily practical action; known intellectually, but not in practice.

Organizations, run on narratives about who they are and how they act and are often well practiced in remaining ignorant of knowledge that does not support these internal narrative structures. In Rayner's typology, organizations, their members, and their leaders, avoid uncomfortable knowledge in four main ways:

> *Denial*: an outright inability or refusal to accept information contrary to the organisational narrative.
> *Dismissal*: a recognition that there is information available that contradicts accepted narratives, while reasons are found to downplay or denigrate it.
> *Diversion*: the construction of decoy activities aimed at drawing attention away from the uncomfortable subject; and
> *Displacement*: where an organisation puts efforts into superficial alternatives to effective action that may appear superficially, to address the uncomfortable subject, but are ultimately ineffective.

Examples of avoidance of uncomfortable knowledge from outside of a policing context are widespread. For example, it is clear that senior staff in the UK Post Office and Fujitsu systematically avoided the knowledge that their Horizon computer system was flawed, through both *denial* and *dismissal* (Christie 2020), leading to flawed prosecutions, damaged lives, and a major national scandal caused by the large-scale miscarriages of justice for sub-postmasters wrongly accused of financial fraud. Rather than grapple with the possibility of flaws in the IT system, and faced with a report highlighting system flaws, from Second Sight, who they had contracted to investigate, the Post Office engaged in *diversion* by issuing a detailed rebuttal document and terminating Second Sight's contract rather than engaging seriously with their findings (Davies 2024).

An example of *displacement* is the way a legalistic framing of failings in institutions can divert energy into finding scapegoats and 'bad apples' displacing the need to address systematic institutional issues (see, e.g. McAlinden 2013 in relation to the handling of child abuse in the Catholic Church in Ireland).

Organizational silence

Organizational silence, the tendency for employees to avoid sharing knowledge and concerns about organizational problems (Morrison and Milliken 2000), is a collective phenomenon. While individual factors like anxiety or lack of confidence play a role, there is significant evidence for the importance of organizational factors in promoting silence. Important motivations for remaining silent include a lack of a climate of psychological safety (Sherf et al. 2020); low belief in organizational justice (Wolfe and Piquero 2011); fear of the consequences of speaking out, fear of harming important relationships, the belief that nothing positive would happen as a result of speaking up, and employees' disengagement from their work roles (Brinsfield 2013). Important antecedents of these motivations are poor or abusive leadership, often associated with leaders' fear of negative feedback, unsupportive work culture, and very hierarchical structures (Milliken et al. 2003).

Employee silence has harmful effects on both organizations and employees. First, a key outcome is that good news moves up the organization, but bad news stays hidden, leaving senior leaders blind to problems or with only weak signals of their scale and prevalence (thus able to ignore them more readily). Second, there is evidence of major harm to employees, with research evidence suggesting strong links between silence and burnout, employee disengagement (Sherf et al. 2020), and intention to quit (Mannan and Kashif 2020), especially for forms of silence motivated by fear, anger, stress, and depression. Thus, silence also hampers operational effectiveness and service delivery.

Non-learning organizations

Despite a large body of literature on organizational learning and learning organizations, less attention has been paid to the conditions in which organizations fail to learn. Drawing on case studies of failure in public sector organizations, Brunsson (1998: 421) coined the term 'non-learning organizations' to describe organizations that have '…*developed a proficiency in ignoring. They may ignore problems and solutions to problems, as well as their own attitudes to these problems and solutions*'.

Non-learning organizations continue to deploy the same operating practices and strategies despite evidence of their failure or harmful effects or in the face of new challenges and demands to which they are unsuited. For example, when faced with technological disruption to their business model from streaming services, the film and music industry sought ways to preserve their existing strategies and business models by creating legal obstacles to streaming, rather than recognizing the depth of the challenge and the new opportunities that they faced (Knopper 2009).

Strategic ignorance

Strategic (or 'wilful') ignorance concerns the deliberate cultivation of ignorance in self or others to serve one's own interests (Jalonen 2023). Commonly, this concerns a defensive strategy to avoid future blame. For example, one police officer described, to us working with a senior officer who, when faced with problematic information would say 'don't tell me about that I don't want to know', even at times resorting to walking out of a room to avoid being given certain kinds of information. This kind of blatant avoidance of information though is perhaps less common than more subtle strategies to maintain plausible ignorance.

While these forms of ignorance have been studied in multiple organizations, the range of research is modest, and they remain largely unstudied in policing.

METHODS

Throughout this study, we have adopted an 'engaged scholarship' approach (Van de Ven 2007); in which researchers are partners with practitioners, who are involved throughout the research process; together tailoring the work to make it useful and relevant to practice.

The initial impetus came from the authors' participation in a workshop (February 2023), which brought academics together with police officers and staff to consider what research would be useful to help forces address the crisis of legitimacy faced by UK policing. The researchers were struck by frequent references to forces' failure to act on what they know and the ways in which difficult issues are avoided. The lead author introduced ideas from work on organizational ignorance, which many participants felt to be an effective way of framing frequently encountered problems. Engagement with police officers and staff continued through three further workshops in which the researchers engaged with members of forces affiliated with a large research centre, in mutual sensemaking about emerging findings, including testing the relevance of findings to practitioners' own experiences. These were supplemented by discussions with individual senior officers and policing staff, and senior figures in policing governance.

The data we analyse are secondary data of two kinds. First, we draw on the extensive data presented in the final report on the Baroness Casey Review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service (Casey 2023), and associated documents, as well as material from the Angiolini Inquiry Part 1 Report (which seeks to establish a definitive account of the career and conduct of the individual responsible for the murder of Sarah Everard (Angiolini 2024).

Second, we draw on data collected as part of 'Operation Soteria', a UK Home Office-funded programme designed to improve the investigation of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) in England and Wales. The qualitative data we drew on were collected as part of Pillar 4 of the Soteria programme which focussed on the learning, development, and wellbeing needs of RASSO investigators. The data were derived from 28 interviews, 23 focus groups with a total of 129 participants, and 128 free-text responses from an associated survey.

While the material we draw on from the Casey Review relates primarily to the Metropolitan Police Service, the multi-force data from the Soteria study and our wider engagement with members of multiple forces and policing governance organizations provide some confidence in the wider applicability of the findings.

All data on which we relied were either anonymized to protect the identity of participants and forces (Soteria), or in the public domain (Angiolini Inquiry and Casey Review). Participants in the Soteria study gave their informed consent to the use of their data in anonymized form by third-party researchers, and the study received ethics review approval from The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC/3854).

Analysis was conducted through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Two members of the research team engaged in the initial coding of the transcripts and documents. Coding categories were further developed through team discussion and by iterating between the data, discussions with practitioners of emerging findings, and prior research literature.

FINDINGS

Much of the data we reviewed can be usefully framed and understood from the perspective of the production of organizational ignorance. Furthermore, the analysis supported literature on how organizational logic is often circular (McGoey 2012); organizational cultures are continually recreated through their enactment since they support officers to navigate and sustain their own status and identity in the organization.

Avoidance of uncomfortable knowledge

Our analysis found evidence of all four strategies for avoidance of uncomfortable knowledge identified by Rayner (2012).

Denial (inability or refusal to accept information contrary to the organizational narrative)

Casey offers many examples that amount to the denial of uncomfortable knowledge at multiple levels of the organization. For example:

> After the [Sara Everard] Vigil took place, the Met continued to defend their view that they were right. This included continuing to pursue those issued with Fixed Penalty Notices at the Vigil. They continually appealed the decision of the High Court that found that it was unlawful for them to have not facilitated the original Vigil, despite a judge calling their claim 'hopeless. (Casey 2023: 33)
>
> When asked whether he would do anything about inappropriate comments about raping a celebrity made by an officer within earshot, one Sergeant responded: 'I don't know what you're talking about – I didn't hear a thing.' (Casey 2023: 161)

The review concluded that:

> The Met does not easily accept criticism nor 'own' its failures. It does not embrace or learn from its mistakes. Instead, it starts from a position that nothing wrong has occurred. (Casey 2023: 13)

Our discussions in workshops with officers and staff in multiple forces suggest that denial of uncomfortable knowledge also plays a significant role in other forces. For example, while some reported that their chief officers had set up reviews to examine the relevance of the Casey Review findings to their own forces, others reported that their senior leadership had dismissed it as irrelevant. For example, two senior female officers described their chief officer as dismissing the report as '*this is the Met not us*' and went on to note that '*no one asked us about our experiences of misogyny*' describing how difficult it was to challenge the view that problems of misogyny, racism, and homophobia were confined to the Met.

Dismissal (downplaying or denigrating information)

A particular form of dismissal, highlighted by the Casey Review, concerned the tendency in the Met to downplay organizational culpability for officer misconduct by characterizing

offenders as bad apples or not really police officers (Casey 2023: 14).

Another important insight concerns the use of euphemism to reduce the emotional impact of information and render it easier to dismiss. For example, in relation to the specialist firearms command, MO19 (one of the units identified as particularly problematic in relation to misogyny, homophobia, racism, and bullying), Casey noted:

> *We were told of one senior Met officer telling others in their chain of command that it was alright to 'colour outside the lines' – to bend and break rules – because firearms officers are harder to replace than other officers and need to be cherished.* (Casey 2023: 192).

'Colouring outside the lines' conjures innocuous images of images of childhood behaviours rendering such statements less emotionally impactful than saying 'we condone serious breaches of professional codes of conduct'; just as in warfare where euphemisms like 'collateral damage' are used to denature the emotional impact of horrific harms to civilian populations. This is an important dismissal tactic since it is the emotions aroused by information that provide an impetus to action (Bagozzi 1992).

Evidence from the Casey Review suggests that complaints of serious inappropriate behaviour have frequently been dismissed as 'just banter' and that, too often, internal complaints against officers fail to be appropriately investigated.

One indicator of the prevalence of misogynistic and sexually predatory behaviour in policing nationally is that abuse of position for sexual purposes is now the most common form of police corruption dealt with by the IOPC, accounting for a quarter of all corruption referrals and around 60 per cent of corruption investigations in 2020 (Independent Office for Police Conduct 2022). This is likely to represent only a small proportion of offences (Independent Office for Police Conduct 2022: 12)

Nonetheless, the existence of systematic problems with serious misogynistic behaviour in policing is dismissed by some senior officers as not a systematic problem but due to a few 'bad apples'. For example:

> *In response to a report in the media, a Met spokesperson said: 'We do not believe there is a culture of misogyny in the Met… [In] an organisation of more than 44,000 people there will be a small number with attitudes and beliefs that are not welcome in the Met'.* (Casey 2023: 164).

Diversion (construction of decoy activities, to draw attention away from information)

Common forms of diversion to avoid addressing uncomfortable knowledge are purely superficial compliance or the corruption of mandated management practices to achieve goals other than intended (see e.g. Fenton-O'Creevy et al. 2011). An important example of these forms of diversion, as well as the strategic production of ignorance (McGoey 2012), was identified by the Casey Review in discussions with a RASSO officer. She reported being told that the main priority was to get names signed up as attending and observed that some 'Not in my Met' briefings,

designed to encourage speaking out about discrimination, had been repurposed to encourage deletion of WhatsApp messages, with officers being told: '*[w]e don't want more people handing their phones in, take a look at your WhatsApps and Facebook statuses and messages, look carefully, they're coming for everyone now, protect yourselves*' (Casey 2023: 179–80).

The Casey Review also offers evidence for another important form of diversion, constraining the terms of a review to avoid uncomfortable knowledge. She notes that in the Operation Leven review of the Parliamentary and Diplomatic Protection (PaDP) unit following Sarah Everard's murder by a PaDP officer, that '*Operation Leven was not given the remit to specifically interrogate whether there is a prevalence of misogyny, other discrimination or conduct issues in the OCU*' (Casey 2023: 200).

Displacement (superficial alternatives to effective action)

An important element of workplace dysfunction that the Casey Review identifies is excessive workloads and under-resourcing of frontline policing, with public protection services such as RASSO especially impacted (Casey 2023: 143–7). This leads to a 'sticking plaster' approach to workplace stress. As we discuss later, Soteria data suggest that knowledge about the underlying causes of workplace stress among RASSO officers is avoided by displacement from addressing the causes to applying resources to alleviate the worst outcomes of that stress. As one RASSO officer in a leadership role noted '*We shouldn't be getting to the point where we're destroying officers to go, "we'll now mend you now we've destroyed you"*'.

Another form of displacement is what Casey characterizes as 'initiativitis', which she describes as:

> *Instead of focusing on getting the basics right, short term projects and campaigns have been launched from HQ without seeing them through, considering their impact or engaging the organisation in embedding enduring systemic change.* (Casey 2023: 14).

There is indirect evidence of the impact of the proliferation of initiatives from the Soteria study. While centrally and at a strategic level there were processes in place at to manage the long-term preparation and implementation of the RASSO National Operating Model, there were contradictions noted at the local force level in the pressure to return to 'business as usual', due to a known high turnover of policing initiatives and subsequent staff churn. One comment was made to the research team, which was often echoed '*we have about a year to get this done – next year it will be something different, probably knife crime*'.

Ignoring uncomfortable knowledge is facilitated where organizational conditions discourage officers and police staff from speaking out, reducing the visibility of issues. We next turn to this problem of organizational silence.

Organizational silence

Silencing of work stress and mental health

Silence about workload stress and mental health is concerning, not just because of the direct impacts on employees, but also because research shows a relationship between work stress, endorsement of attitudes which support misconduct, and deviant behaviour (e.g. Lawson et al. 2022).

The analysis of Soteria data revealed consistent themes. RASSO officers reported excessive workloads, the stress of psychologically difficult investigation content, low levels of training and experience in teams, and the consequent stress of '*choosing which victim to let down*' (Soteria: senior RASSO officer).

Allied with these themes, many voiced reasons that stress and mental health concerns were not spoken about openly within the team or wider organization (Maguire and Sondhi 2024). These included the perception that nothing would be done (often offering prior experiences as evidence for that belief), fear of negative impacts on reputation, work opportunities, and career, and an internalized desire to avoid abstracting themselves from work because of the perceived impact it would have on victims and their colleagues.

The view that breaking their silence about welfare issues was futile or harmful for careers was clear.

> *… the main issue is that even if you were to go to someone to explain your concerns, nothing changes. So, what is the point?* (Soteria: RASSO officer)

> *The job go on about wellbeing, but I feel like it's literally, 'we need to look like we're doing something'. When in actual fact, they are creating our mental issues, our stresses, because they're not addressing the real issues that are causing those problems.* (Soteria: RASSO officer)

Some officers highlighted the wider negative effects of speaking out:

> *Whatever happens, wherever you work, the next place you go, everyone will know all about it…. specially when it comes to mental health* (Soteria: RASSO officer)

The analysis made visible a perceived sacred obligation to avoid abstraction from frontline operational work. Many officers had internalized this organizational messaging as an individual duty to avoid abstracting themselves from work for reasons of illness or stress; a phenomenon often discussed as 'presenteeism' (Baker-McClearn et al. 2010; Hesketh et al. 2014). As one participant observed:

> *…because we don't want to put our friends and our colleagues under that extra pressure. We carry it and we get on with it and we deal with it and we suffer in silence. And it is a very difficult place and there is no outlet.* (Soteria: RASSO officer)

Leadership and silence

While research on organizational silence draws links between 'toxic leadership' and organizational silence (e.g. Julmi 2021), this was not the predominant theme in our analysis of the Soteria data. Rather, reluctance to communicate upwards about work stress impacting mental health seemed driven by the sense that immediate leaders were as powerless to effect change as those they led. Officers described a sense of learned helplessness about the inaction when concerns are reported:

> *… my DI and the DCI says, 'I've raised your issues. I've raised your concerns. I've raised what is causing you stress. That is all I can do.' … nothing changes.* (Soteria: RASSO officer)

This sense of helplessness was echoed by some in leadership roles:

> *I hate the fact that I can't give them the things that they need to get the job done, and that sometimes I have to watch some of them fall apart, and there's not really anything that's within my power… all I've got for them are warm words… and that makes me feel dirty and horrible.* (Soteria: senior RASSO officer)

There is evidence in the data that this sense of helplessness and the silence it produces are at least partially generated by being trapped in a double-bind. A double-bind is the simultaneous imposition of contradictory requirements, along with conditions that render their incompatibility undiscussable (Julmi 2021). Such conditions are common in organizations facing significant resource constraints, where senior management effectively demands that 'we must do more with less', and 'failure is not an option'. For example, one of the Soteria participants described:

> *In light of the recent murder of Sarah Everard there is a 'refreshed' call from the Senior Leadership Team that violence against women must be dealt with. […but] everyday there is limited staff, limited training and limited equipment (lack of phone download machines, computers to review phone data, view CCTV) to progress.*

As Julmi (2021) notes, in the face of conflicting injunctions but no scope for communicating about their incompatibility, the victim of the double-bind can always be sanctioned.

> *I had a Superintendent criticise me a few weeks ago [for not being physically present at 7am]…, really angry, I was duty SIO on weekend on a Sunday. Now, you're on call from seven in the morning through to seven in the morning, 24 hours. … Saturday night before, I was off duty, I was looking at my emails. I phone the SIO the night before to have a handover, … in my own time. That morning, half six, I check my emails, I drive into work for eight o'clock. …. I chair [the management meeting at nine], … I left the station at 8 PM, get home, have a bit of food, then back on, taking calls through to about midnight.* (Soteria: senior RASSO officer)

Messaging about the crucial importance of effective action (primary injunction) combines with requirements to work within resource constraints (secondary injunction), while for some local leaders, the experience is of this contradiction being undiscussable:

> [They are] *always pushing the responsibility back rather than saying, this is telling us we've got a problem, and we need to pick it up and do something.* (Soteria: senior RASSO officer)

Others felt it could be reputationally harmful to push bad news upward:

> *I feel like I need to demonstrate that I can do this. So, I can't be moaning and complaining, I've just got to deal with it. … I'm sure a lot of people feel like that* (Soteria: senior RASSO officer)

Silence in the face of misogyny, racism, homophobia, and other misconduct

Analysis of the Casey Review offers ample evidence about the extent and serious nature of organizational silencing. Here, toxic leadership was highlighted more often. As the final report notes:

> *Keeping your head down, looking the other way, and telling people – especially senior officers – what they want to hear is the way things are done. … those who speak up in the Met learn the hard way that there are adverse consequences for themselves, for their careers, and for their teams. … A bullying culture underpins all this.* (Casey 2023: 13–14)

This issue is not confined to the Met. For example, one of the Soteria research participants described their experience of speaking out about breaches of professional conduct standards.

> *I've been involved in a disciplinary hearing for another officer, where I was a witness, and then, I've had skippers walk past me in the corridor without even acknowledging I'm even there. I've had other PCs physically leave a room because I've gone and sat in that room.* (Soteria: RASSO officer)

The Casey Review offers many examples of the adverse impacts of speaking out. Casey provides a case study of a female officer who experienced extended misogynistic bullying and unwanted sexual attention.

> *I knew if I made a formal complaint, that's going to blight the rest of my career. I'd be known as a complainer, weary, a trouble-maker.* (Casey 2023: 189)

Organizational silence and the avoidance of uncomfortable knowledge produce conditions in which organizational learning is difficult to achieve, as we go on to discuss.

Organizational non-learning

The Angiolini Inquiry (Part 1) considered how the murderer of Sarah Everard was able to remain a police officer for so long and sought to establish a definitive account of his conduct. In reporting on this inquiry, Angiolini (2024) identified some key examples of organizational non-learning across multiple forces. A particular concern is the failure to properly investigate multiple allegations of indecent exposure (across three different police forces) by Everard's murderer, leading up to her killing. Angiolini notes attitudes that indecent exposure lies at the lower end of severity (including within the IOPC), but also some concern among senior officers that it may be a precursor to more serious offences. There has been evidence that this is the case, for some time (see e.g. Firestone et al. 2006). The failure to treat such offences as worthy of more serious investigation, at best, reflects a failure to learn from research evidence and to translate senior officer concerns into practice.

Casey highlights failures in the Met over many years to learn from multiple reviews and act on learning, including on issues such as a racially biased misconduct system, poor child protection, and recognition of predatory behaviour (Casey 2023: 13).

An example is the sustained failure to learn from external feedback and improve child protection approaches. A 2016 inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary[1] (HMIC) was described by the then Chief Inspector of HMIC as '*The most severely critical that HMIC has published about any force, on any subject, ever.*' (Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary 2017: 21)

Despite the severity of the criticism and the strength of the recommendations, Casey notes that

> *Six years on, the force themselves know they are still not gripping child protection. Despite continually finding significant problems, HMICFRS have only been able to keep returning and commenting* (Casey 2023: 140).

Systemic and structural factors supporting the production of ignorance

To understand the conditions that lead to the systematic production of ignorance in an organization, it is necessary to go beyond generic appeals to problems of culture and consider the structural conditions that support ignorance.

Disconnection across rank structure

In organizations such as the police and armed forces with rank structures and command-and-control approaches to management, there is an ever-present risk that communication flows primarily downward and laterally, and senior leaders fail to grasp the realities of frontline work (Sharp 2021). The consequence can be that uncomfortable knowledge is more easily avoided as those in senior roles lose touch with the realities of the frontline. This is exacerbated when organizational conditions incentivize staff to remain silent about problems they face. In some uniformed organizations, such as the British armed forces, this risk is recognized and mitigated (Sharp 2021). However, policing lacks systematic approaches to mitigate the dysfunctional effects of rank structures.

Casey points to some major disconnects across the rank structure of the Met, driven by highly centralized and prescriptive decision-making.

> *The Review Team witnessed this disconnect between different teams and ranks in one unit on a BCU visit. The Team met with the SLT at the start of the day who talked about empowering their officers and staff, the opportunities to move around, their high morale and how well they were managing probationers and trainee detectives.*
>
> *We then met a group of Constables and Detective Constables. They felt trapped in their roles, close to exhaustion, unequal to the size and intensity of caseloads, and that they were not understood by their SLT* (Casey 2023: 94).

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[1] Later reconfigured as Her/His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Service (HMICFRS).

This gap [between BCUs and New Scotland Yard] *is magnified by the lack of autonomy available to BCU Commanders to 'own' their patch and set a local tone and strategy. The 'centre' at New Scotland Yard always trumps the local* (Casey 2023: 96).

Others identified maladaptive consequences of the career system on leadership; especially the pace of officer turnover it generates:

… once you get to DCI and above, they're not interested really in their work staff. They say they are, but they're interested in their portfolio looking good because they're going for their next rank. …. They want to get to that department, they're there for six months or a year, make a statement, look good on paper, move. Next department, next promotion. (Soteria: RASSO officer)

This importance of upward impression management was reinforced by others:

When you're in this environment, you know you're only as good as your last job, and when that job goes wrong, we are very vulnerable. Now, I deal with that by ensuring that staff know what my expectation is. (Soteria: senior RASSO officer)

It seems likely that these disconnects in the way knowledge and ideas flow, and difficulty in getting concerns taken seriously at higher levels of the organization make it easier for uncomfortable knowledge to be avoided, and for cynicism to develop, encouraging silence.

In any organization, operational capability matters and deserves careful attention. However, an exclusive focus on day-to-day operational exigencies at the expense of long-term planning, workforce development, and necessary strategic change can be highly damaging, creating a disconnect between knowledge of strategic imperatives and genuine action to address them. A key uncomfortable truth avoided in much of policing is that neither major strategic change nor vital workforce development can be achieved without short- and medium-term reductions in overall operational capability. Thus, rather than long-term change planning, with persistent intent over time, too many short-term initiatives take inadequate account of the operational trade-offs to be managed and harm operational capability while failing to achieve their goals.

Bias for action and operations rather than planning, reflection, and strategy

In a study of UK policing leaders' responses to the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, Fenton-O'Creevy et al. (2022) noted the distinction made by senior officers between 'quick-time' and 'slow-time' decision-making in policing. Research participants felt reactive decisions in the face of immediate challenges (as in policing major and critical incidents) were mostly effective. However, there was greater concern about 'slow-time' decision-making in relation to developing the organization and its people.

This gap in strategic planning and implementation capability in UK policing was also echoed in the Soteria data and in evidence provided to the Casey Review of the Met. This gap represents a major gulf between what is known in policing orga-nizations about the need for change and reform and effective action to bring about change.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We have offered evidence for the systematic and dysfunctional production of ignorance in policing in England and Wales. There is evidence of the use of strategies for avoiding uncomfortable knowledge, of widespread organizational silence about officer misconduct, excessive workloads, and mental health, and of organizational non-learning.

Understanding the ways in which ignorance is produced, reproduced, and used in policing is an important contribution to explaining how organizations that contain many good people have allowed conditions to arise in which egregious misconduct has been tolerated and opportunities to forestall major criminal behaviour by officers have been missed. Actions to address these issues must go beyond framing legitimacy problems as a question of public trust and confidence in the police to fully accept that this has been underpinned by major and systemic failures of trustworthiness in elements of policing.

The production of ignorance as a barrier to strategic change

Research evidence is always backward-looking, and there are efforts being made towards change and reform in UK policing. These include work to respond to the Casey Review and the Angiolini Inquiry, and, in response to the Soteria research, a National Model being rolled out to improve the investigation of RASSO.

However, without serious attention to the conditions that produce ignorance and without serious attempts to grapple with uncomfortable knowledge at all levels of policing, knowledge-action, and action-outcome gaps will persist, and much investment in change programmes will fail to deliver public value.

Important forms of uncomfortable knowledge that need to be grappled with at a senior level concern the lack of visibility of the daily realities of frontline operations to senior leaders, the need to trade off short- and medium-term operational capability to develop staff and implement strategic change effectively, and the systemic problems causing staff to believe that if they speak out, they will be disregarded or punished.

Our findings resonate with those from broader studies of change and reform in policing. Multiple studies identify problems of an inward focussed blame culture in policing (Metcalfe 2017; Tomkins 2020; Fenton-O'Creevy et al. 2024), leading to defensive and reactive decision-making (Artinger et al. 2019), where decisions are made to protect from blame and reputational damage rather than acting to best achieve organizational goals and public value. As Metcalfe (2017: 161) notes, typical policing organization responses to failure 'take one of three forms, "covering up", "sanction" or the development of "new rules"'. This kind of blame culture cannot be addressed piecemeal. For example, commendable attempts to introduce reflective practice as a response to less egregious errors can easily become corrupted within prevailing blame cultures to the extent that being 'given reflective practice' in response to a disciplinary investigation is seen as punitive rather than an opportunity for genuine learning. Furthermore,

this individualized approach to reflective practice can reinforce perceptions of failures as due to individual incompetence or ill-intent, rather than opportunities for a wider focus of reflection to learn about the organizational conditions that make such failures more likely.

Given the nature of the secondary data we draw on, it is difficult to determine the extent to which ignorance is generated wilfully as a strategy to protect self-interest (strategic ignorance). However, we would note that this form of ignorance production is more likely where a culture of blame acts as a strong incentive to act defensively to avoid blame and protect reputation.

Our study has focused on the investigation of RASSO, but draws also on evidence that suggests misogyny, sexual harassment, and serious sexual abuse to be both common and unaddressed in parts of policing. Commissioned reviews into these factors often result in the reactive development of training as an answer to remedy problems and enable behaviour and attitude change. However, as Stanko and Hohl (2018) discuss, traditional approaches to police training, typically involve trainers who have come from the very culture that the training seeks to change. Paradoxically therefore training can serve to reinforce the status quo rather than support change.

The hidden financial costs of the production of ignorance

Not only does the production and reproduction of ignorance in policing risk the destruction of public value, it is likely to incur significant hidden financial costs. Avoidance of uncomfortable knowledge prevents addressing issues early. By the time they have grown to proportions that make them unavoidable, they will be more difficult and expensive to resolve. Organizational silence and non-learning can mean costly investments in initiatives that repeatedly fail to resolve the problems they purport to address.

Undoing the production of ignorance?

Research on the production of ignorance in organizations is at an early stage of development. However, some evidence points to how the problems we highlight may be addressed.

First, as Smithson (2015: 387) notes, '[p]*eople have vested interests in unknowns, and reasons for not knowing, not wanting to know, and/or not wanting others to know… Knowledge may be power, but so is ignorance.…* [Hence], *unmaking ignorance also requires capabilities, motivations, and interests sufficient for its undoing.*' The implication is that undoing the production of ignorance in an organization needs to start with an understanding of the purposes and motivations it serves and how these may be dismantled.

For example, senior leaders must, of necessity, remain ignorant of much of what goes on in the organizations they lead. Attention is a scarce resource at the top level of an organization. While senior roles support seeing the 'big picture' of organizational goals and challenges, scale is not free; it comes at the expense of detail, especially frontline operational detail. However, combined with a steep hierarchy and reluctance to voice bad news upward, senior leaders receive only weak signals of emerging challenges, which are all too easy to ignore.

Some leaders recognize this and take action to mitigate this problem. For example, the lead author worked for 6 months with Gerry Robinson (change consultant and former CEO of Granada) on a major change programme. He described his approach as CEO as mostly getting good people in the right roles and ruthlessly delegating. However, he also noted that he would take personal responsibility for around three key issues a year and drill down into these in-depth, including spending time discussing them with frontline staff. He saw this as key to his success in managing strategic change (Robinson, pers. comm. 2006). Another tool for increasing the visibility of issues across organizational levels is upward (or reverse) mentoring (Browne 2021). This is a process by which more senior leaders are mentored by more junior members of the organization. First adopted in General Electric in 1999, it has become increasingly common as a development tool, with approximately 20 per cent of Stanton House FTSE 100 companies running such schemes (Eaves 2018).

Undoing ignorance is an emotional as well as a cognitive challenge. Breaking silence may mean overcoming fear of the, often very real, consequences. Engaging with uncomfortable knowledge is uncomfortable. Often, it means unbelieving things about yourself or your organization that matter to you and your identity. For example, an unintended consequence of an uncritical attachment to the role of the Peelian Principles and the model of British Policing they underpin as 'world leading' is that they can support discounting external criticism that challenges this cherished identity (see e.g. Reiner 1995, 2023).

Recommendations for future research

First, our analysis of secondary data provides an important account of the ways in which organizational ignorance may be produced, used, and reproduced in policing. However, there is a clear scope for primary research that examines the organizational conditions that contribute to the production of ignorance. A particularly relevant focus in many policing organizations may be on the ways in which the production of ignorance is implicated in implementation difficulties for strategic change programmes. In this context, there may be great value in an action-research approach that combines research, learning, and action to address difficulties.

Second, we suggest that it would greatly enrich studies of knowledge management and evidence-based practice to complement accounts of how knowledge is produced and used with accounts of how ignorance is produced and used.

Limitations

As with all research, this study can only paint a partial picture. The data on which we rely are overweighted to the Metropolitan Police Service, which is the subject of both the Casey Review and is prominent in the Angiolini Inquiry. Nonetheless, the use of data from the Pillar 4, Soteria study, which worked with multiple forces, and our wider engagement with policing practitioners lend credence to the idea that the issues we identify are by no means unique to the Met.

Conflict of interest. None declared.

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