

Introduction to vulnerability-related risk

What and who these evidence-based guidelines are for

First published 18 November 2021

Written by College of Policing

About these guidelines

Our approach to recognising vulnerability-related risk is based on the concept that vulnerabilities are features of individuals, and that harm – or the risk of harm – occurs when relevant vulnerabilities interact with the individual's situation. For example, an individual with a learning disability may not be at risk of harm if they receive suitable support and protection that helps to prevent them from being exploited or abused.

THRIVE

We have adopted the THRIVE (threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement) definition of vulnerability. This states that a person is vulnerable if, as a result of their situation or circumstances, they are unable to take care of or protect themselves or others from harm or exploitation.

Applying the THRIVE approach requires the following four steps.

1. Identify an individual's vulnerability or vulnerabilities.
2. Understand how these vulnerabilities interact with the situation to create harm or risk of harm.
3. Assess the level of harm or risk of harm.
4. Take appropriate and proportionate action if required, involving partners where they have the relevant skills and resources.

Over the last decade, responders have been reliant on checklists and risk tools to identify and assess risk. The review of the research evidence undertaken in developing these guidelines identified a lack of evidence associated with the effectiveness of these checklists and tools. Most people who need help will be vulnerable in more than one way, and a single tool is unlikely to address all vulnerabilities.

This does not mean, however, that checklists and tools have no value. They can inform and guide a responder on the nature and origin of risks. However, decisions about the level of risk and what action to take rely on responders using professional judgement.



Note: ensure a refreshed assessment of risk and vulnerability at each police interaction.

What these guidelines are for

These guidelines focus on spotting the signs associated with vulnerability (clues), as well as creating a safe, trusting environment to identify risk, encouraging the disclosure of harm and eliciting the information required to inform appropriate actions to keep people safe (communication).

Responding officers and staff often come into contact with people in crisis, who have already suffered or are at risk of harm. These initial police interactions present crucial opportunities for appropriate action, for example, safeguarding.

Responding to these opportunities requires the ability to recognise vulnerabilities and risks of harm, to maintain an open and enquiring mind, to understand your own responsibilities and to know the most appropriate action to take. [Appendix 1](#) presents examples of action that may be appropriate when responding to these types of incidents.

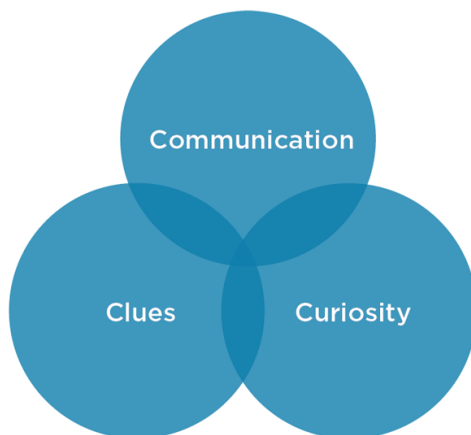
The aim of these guidelines is to support all officers and staff to:

- spot the clues associated with vulnerability-related risk
- create an environment that encourages individuals to disclose relevant information
- be curious and obtain a rich picture of circumstances associated with an incident

This will help responders to deliver an appropriate policing response, irrespective of crime or incident type. For the guidelines to be implemented effectively, there must be suitable professional development opportunities for all staff.

The research evidence that underpins the guidelines is mainly drawn from the experiences of vulnerable victims. Police encounter individuals in other contexts, for example, witnesses, suspects, detainees, colleagues. These encounters may also reveal vulnerabilities. Although not the focus, the guidelines can be used to help understand vulnerabilities in different contexts and to frame appropriate responses where relevant.

The evidence base is strongest in identifying themes that cut across public protection strands, as well as those that can positively inform and influence professional judgement. This evidence base is reflected in three responder-focused guidelines – clues, communication and curiosity.



The three responder-focused guidelines – communication, clues and curiosity

Applying these guidelines

To better inform professional judgement, the three guidelines should be applied in combination, not in isolation. They are not hierarchical – one is not more important than any other.

The three guidelines are also potentially self-reinforcing. For example, good communication can reveal more clues, which may open up more avenues for investigation (curiosity). This can then lead to more focused communication, and so on.

If officers and staff listen to people, spot potential indicators of risk and are curious about these indicators, it will help them to identify individuals who require higher levels of intervention and support, as well as those who do not.

In order to respond effectively to a person's vulnerabilities, and to manage them so they do not suffer harm, it is necessary to have an assessment of the capacity and resilience of that individual, as well as the people around them.

Individuals are resilient and resourceful to different degrees. They are supported by families, friends and communities to different levels. The police form part of a broader system that should work together to make people safer, building on the resilience of the individual and those around them.

The framework for support from the broader system can be understood as operating at three levels. This framework is based on the College's [10 principles of risk](#).

Framework for support

Level	Principle	Description and link to risk principles
-------	-----------	---

<p>Individual</p>	<p>Making risk-based decisions is a core professional requirement.</p>	<p>The risk of harm can never be totally removed (Principle 4).</p> <p>All members of the police service must make decisions in conditions of uncertainty (Principle 1) to achieve the safety, security and wellbeing of individuals and communities (Principle 2).</p>
<p>Individual</p>	<p>Recording or referring risk decisions requires professional judgement.</p>	<p>Decision makers are required to consider the value and likelihood of a decision's possible benefits against the seriousness and likelihood of the harm (Principle 3).</p> <p>After considering the likelihood of harm occurring, as well as its seriousness should it happen (Principle 7), decision makers should use professional judgement to determine whether to record risk decisions and whether to share them with partner agencies (Principle 9).</p>

<p>Organisation</p>	<p>Evaluating risk decisions should focus on the quality of the decision making, not the outcome.</p>	<p>When reviewing others' decision making, the reviewer should take into account the dilemmas or emergencies that the decision maker faced, whether they were part of a sequence of decisions, or the role and responsibilities of any other agencies (Principle 5).</p> <p>The standard expected of risk decisions should be consistent with what would be expected from officers of similar rank, specialism or experience in the same circumstances (Principle 6).</p>
<p>Organisation</p>	<p>Learning from risk decisions is necessary to reduce risk aversion and improve decision making.</p>	<p>The police service can encourage a more positive approach to risk by openly supporting decision makers and by building their confidence to avoid them being risk averse (Principle 10).</p> <p>Recognising good risk taking promotes a culture that learns from successes as well as failures (Principle 8).</p>

<p>Wider system</p>	<p>The police should not assume responsibility, directly or indirectly, for all forms of risk.</p>	<p>This underpins the 10 risk principles, as other agencies may have more appropriate skills (for example, in risk assessment), resources (for example, ability to provide long-term interventions) and legal powers.</p>
----------------------------	--	---

This framework links directly to the guidelines. For example, clues, communication and curiosity offer an evidence-based opportunity to inform professional judgement. The first guideline ([Professional development](#)) is aimed at senior leaders, to drive organisational learning that can help to underpin an effective response at an individual and organisational level.

Development of these guidelines

These guidelines were developed collaboratively by a College Guideline Committee consisting of frontline practitioners, subject matter experts and academics. The committee was supported by College of Policing specialist staff.

The role of the committee was to develop the scope, consider the evidence and draft the guidelines, taking into account the views of stakeholders.

Evidence base for these guidelines

The guidelines and supporting information draw on the best available evidence – in this case, an extensive review of the relevant research, along with insights from police officers, police staff, partner organisations and other sectors.

Although there is a large evidence base in this area, the largest proportion of studies included in this review focused on domestic abuse and serious sexual abuse victims.

However, these studies do provide useful findings to help responders recognise more complex factors, such as coercive control, that span a range of vulnerabilities.

There was sufficient consistency across the studies reviewed for the committee to give a clear steer as to the skills that officers and staff need, as well as the clues and signals of which they should be aware.

The supporting information has been developed using:

- practitioner expertise, including face-to-face interviews and calls for practice
- generally applicable suggestions extracted from existing guidance on achieving best evidence
- relevant information from the research evidence

Who the guidelines are for

The guidelines are aimed at policing responders who, as part of their role, identify and protect vulnerable people.

Policing responders include police officers or staff in initial encounters with members of the public, such as:

- frontline officers
- PCSOs
- specials
- call handlers
- front counter staff

These guidelines may be useful for specialist officers and staff conducting secondary risk assessments. They may also be useful for individuals who are responsible for supporting responders or for developing organisational policy and strategy connected to vulnerability-related risk, for example, senior leaders.

Although these guidelines have been developed primarily for face-to-face interactions, the issue of identifying and responding to vulnerability is relevant in other forms of interactions, such as telephone calls and contact via social media. Officers and staff who are involved in these roles may also find a number of the guidelines relevant to their role.

Tags

Evidence-based policing Vulnerable people Risk