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# Surveillance or Support? Policing Harmful Sexual Behaviour Among Young People in Schools

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the policing of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) among young people in schools, drawing on qualitative research conducted with police and schools in southeast England. Utilising a Foucauldian surveillance perspective, we explore the challenges police experience in balancing punitive measures with relationship-building efforts. We highlight contradictions between policing objectives and strategies, with police engagement often emphasising surveillance, intelligence gathering and detection, including among officers endorsing relationship-based practice with young people. The overarching concern with behaviour management and discipline of young people in schools, combined with inadequate training and resourcing, perpetuates authoritarian policing practices, with implications for police–youth relations. We identify how tensions between deterrence and trust play out through a wider crisis of legitimacy regarding the capacity for legal frameworks and criminal justice to adequately capture and respond to HSB. We suggest these limitations undermine young people's rights, erode trust between young people and police, and ultimately compromise safety through hindering the effectiveness of HSB prevention and response efforts.

## 1 | Introduction

The role of the police in preventing and responding to harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) among young people in schools presents significant conceptual and practical challenges. Police involvement is justified by the need to deter HSB, raise awareness of acceptable and unacceptable conduct, and improve incident reporting rates and responses (Bradford and Yesberg 2019). Policing in schools is, however, characterised by tensions between crime control objectives and welfare-oriented responses based on trust and relationship-building with young people. Furthermore, HSB among young people often transcends the boundaries of legal frameworks, complicating the role of policing in schools. These complexities raise important questions about the purpose, scope and nature of police presence in schools.

Adopting a Foucauldian surveillance lens, we explore how police strategies in schools reflect broader disciplinary processes aimed at monitoring and controlling young people. While police participants emphasised building relationships with young people, these efforts often served surveillance and intelligence-gathering objectives. We consider how school behaviour management and discipline compound with entrenched authoritarian policing cultures, even when officers adopt ostensibly relational approaches to their engagements with young people. We highlight limitations of legalistic frameworks for addressing

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HSB and argue that policing strategies risk undermining young people's rights and eroding trust. We advocate rethinking policing objectives and approaches in schools to focus on supporting young people's sexual citizenship and identifying and rectifying the limitations of legalistic and policing frameworks for preventing and responding to HSB.

## 2 | Literature Review

HSB among young people is a widespread issue, including in schools (Allardyce and Yates 2018; Erooga and Masson 2006; Hackett et al. 2016; Vizard 2002). In England, awareness of the problem increased following the Everyone's Invited movement, which documented extensive normalisation of HSB in schools, particularly affecting girls and young women Ofsted (2021). Analysis of police recorded crime in England suggests child-on-child abuse accounts for approximately half of all reported cases of child sexual abuse Vulnerability, Knowledge and Practice Programme (2024), although incidents dealt with by police and schools range from illegal acts, such as sexual assault and harassment, to behaviours occupying a legal grey area, including pressured or coerced sexual activity Setty et al. (2024). Incidents also take place online, including in the form of image-based sexual abuse and harassment Ringrose et al. (2021).

In England, the statutory Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum mandates schools to educate young people about HSB offence categories and associated legal concepts such as consent DfE (2019). This includes the legal presumption that young people under the age of 16 lack the capacity to consent to physical sexual activity, while imagery of an intimate or sexual nature featuring and/or sent to individuals under 18 is illegal to produce, store and distribute because it constitutes 'indecent imagery of minors'. These legal frameworks are blunt instruments when applied to the complexities of young people's socio-sexual lives and experiences, while the framing of all sexual activity under 16 as unlawful homogenises young people and removes agency, acting as a barrier to identifying and reporting abuse. Notably, age of consent was not conceptualised to prevent or punish 'underage' sexual activity, but to respond to adult-perpetrated abuse of children despite now often framed to police young people's practices. Legal responses to image-sharing further complicate this issue, as laws designed to protect children now target those who engage in consensual image-sharing, failing to distinguish between abuse and non-abusive practices Ringrose et al. (2021); Setty et al. (2024). This legal ambiguity deters young people from reporting abuse due to fear of punishment, while hindering a nuanced approach to responding to abuse and educating young people about ethical online sexual conduct.

Legal frameworks governing HSB are further complicated by the discretionary powers of school and police authorities. Formal action requires detecting/reporting the incident, followed by assessments of public interest and evidence. These processes are often opaque to young people, contrasted against the binarised legal warnings they receive from adults (lawful vs. unlawful conduct). Those who report abuse but receive a police outcome of No Further Action (NFA) may be left feeling let down or disbelieved. Moreover, while diversionary mechanisms have been introduced to avoid criminalising young people involved in non-aggravated image sharing (Phippen and Bond 2023)—such as Outcome 21 (recording without formal action) and Outcome 22 (educational interventions)—young people are rarely taught about these mechanisms, and there remain uncertainties about the long-term implications of police records for young people.

Legal frameworks insufficiently capture the complex socio-cultural dynamics that underpin HSB, including longstanding systemic contexts of sexual violence and harassment within adult society Setty et al. (2024). These dynamics normalise harmful behaviours and obscure the line between acceptable and unacceptable conduct, with implications for definitions and responses to harm, both among young people and adults Firmin (2020); Lloyd (2019). Binary legal frameworks, combined with evidentiary challenges of proving sexual misconduct, limit the potential for criminal justice to effectively respond to HSB, especially when young people's peer-based sexual cultures and individual agency may not align directly with adult authority or legal definitions Setty (2023).

## 3 | Theoretical Framework

More broadly, there are debates about the legitimacy of police presence in schools. A review of police-school partnerships in England identified that an emphasis on prevention and safety may improve trust and perceptions of credibility and legitimacy among young people regarding police Bradford and Yesberg (2019). These outcomes are based on principles of procedural justice, which hold that policing strategies impact citizens' 'attitudes about legal authorities' and when experienced as fair and respectful, encourage 'compliance [with the law] by consent' rather than from coercion Bradford and Yesberg (2019, 14). These strategies may, when deployed in schools, improve youth-police relations and the willingness of victims to report and when resulting in compliance, reduce incidents of HSB.

Policing in schools entails role conflicts; however, notably between enforcement and relationship-building strategies (Broll and Howells 2021; Jacobs et al. 2021). These tensions reflect the hybridity of care and control that characterises late-modern frameworks of policing and penal strategies Robinson (2008). Effective police practice in schools requires specialised training, clear role delineation, and sufficient resources to support holistic, multiagency approaches (Briers 2003; Gaffney et al. 2021; O'Connor 2010; Trotman and Thomas 2016). Studies suggest police struggle to reconcile their supportive and enforcement roles, particularly in settings where trust and legitimacy are critical. For instance, Huey and Ricciardelli (2015) highlight how role expectations in policing conflict with the realities of practice, leading to frustration and disengagement. Similarly, Broll and Huey (2015) argue that police responses to issues like 'cyberbullying' often reflect ambiguities about the scope of police responsibility, raising questions about the appropriateness of police involvement in complex social issues that often transcend legal frameworks.

Lloyd et al. (2023) caution that 'relationship-based practice' by police must go beyond strategic deployment for surveillance and compliance purposes to encompass genuine attempts at



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understanding the contexts of HSB among young people. Overly rationalised or proceduralised approaches to relationship-building, including for surveillance, risk damaging trust and perpetuating perceptions of police as primarily enforcers rather than supporters, especially among already over-policed communities (Gaffney et al. 2021; Henshall 2018; Jacobs et al. 2021; Joseph-Salisbury 2021). Adopting a Foucauldian surveillance lens, Henshall (2018) argues that policing in schools represents and creates an oppressive model of state authority for young people, particularly when police are targeted to 'risky' or 'at-risk' schools and young people. Giroux (2003) describes young people as a 'generation of suspects', growing up under omnipresent surveillance that frames them as risky or deviant. Giroux connects this surveillance to broader cultural shifts towards fear and control, which mirrors what Joseph-Salisbury (2021, 587) identifies as the disruption of the 'sense of safety' that should exist in schools. He suggests this is particularly acute for young people already subject to over-policing in their communities or with negative perceptions of or experiences with police.

Relationship-based practice may entail 'softer' strategies, like informally interacting with young people, but constitute surveillance when used to discreetly monitor behaviour, jeopardising perceptions of genuine trust among young people amid feelings of being monitored. In schools, young people's behaviour is policed through broader behavioural management and discipline policies, including pertaining to school uniform, mobile phones, attendance and behaviour Setty et al. (2024), entrenching a climate of surveillance and control. A Foucauldian perspective suggests policing in schools functions as a disciplinary mechanism, with 'discipline' referring to the means of maintaining social order through surveillance and normalisation of behaviour in accordance with societal and institutional expectations. Foucault's theory of 'panopticism' describes how power operates through visible and invisible surveillance, creating a sense of being constantly watched that disciplines individuals to self-regulate their behaviour Foucault (1977). In schools, this manifests through overt forms of surveillance, such as cameras, the forced downloading of behaviour management and progression apps on children's and parent's phones, and covert practices, such as informal monitoring during interactions between police, school staff and students. These mechanisms seek to extend authority over young people, constrain their autonomy and reinforce hierarchical power dynamics.

Henshall (2018) applies this Foucauldian lens to argue that policing in schools perpetuates an oppressive model of state authority, particularly when targeted at 'risky' or 'at-risk' schools and young people. Even 'softer' approaches, such as relationship-based policing, are imbued with surveillance imperatives that undermine trust and shift the focus from genuine support to control. These dynamics underscore how disciplinary institutions work together to manage populations and maintain social order.

We adopt this framework to interpret our data, particularly focusing on surveillance and its role in shaping policing practices in schools. We disentangle the objectives in participants' accounts, identifying how officers constructed their roles and positioned themselves in relation to young people. By situating participants' accounts within wider societal discourses on authority, adult-youth relations, and the disciplinary management of young people in schools, we identify contradictions between policing objectives and practices whereby surveillance, often implicit in relationship-based policing, was enacted with the objective of disciplining young people in accordance with adult norms, thus reinforcing hierarchies of power and constraining autonomy.

Aligning with Foucauldian discourse analysis—which seeks to uncover how language, practices and institutional arrangements produce and sustain power relations—we consider the underlying assumptions and objectives embedded in participants' narratives, examining how surveillance permeates 'softer' policing strategies and relationship-based policing acts as a disciplinary mechanism rather than a purely supportive practice. We explore how police reconciled tensions between crime control and relationship building through discourses of relationship-based practice as valuable and effective for achieving policing objectives, reflecting and extending authoritarian police cultures within the disciplinary context of schools.

## 4 | Methods

This study utilised a mixed-methods approach, involving primary and secondary data collection and analysis, to explore the policing of HSB in schools and the relationship between schools and police in preventing and responding to HSB. Mixed-methods research enables the triangulation of findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena (Creswell 2014; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). In this paper, we focus on the qualitative findings reflecting our aim of critically examining the relational and cultural dynamics underpinning police involvement in schools, rather than presenting a detailed analysis of quantitative trends.

Qualitative data collection involved interviews with professional stakeholders including nine police officers, six school staff, eight service providers, and nine young people. Interviews with police and service providers were held on MS Teams, while interviews with school staff and young people were held in person in the schools. Each interview was co-conducted by the lead author and one other author. They were audio recorded and auto-transcribed, with a post-graduate assistant verifying the transcripts against the recordings for accuracy.

Police participants had experience dealing with cases of HSB, including four Youth Engagement Officers (YEO); four officers working in the High Harm Perpetrator Unit (HHPU) and a further officer specialising in online sexual crimes. Interviews with school staff were conducted in two schools, with a Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) and Headteacher from one school, and a DSL, Deputy Head, Head of Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education, Head of Pastoral Care, and a receptionist from the second school. Interviews with service providers spanned statutory and non-statutory services, including Children's Social Care; Local Education Authority; Targeted Youth Support; an adolescent forensic service; an online safety service; and third-sector organisations providing domestic violence and children protection services and interventions. These interviews explored professional perspectives on and



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experiences of preventing and responding to HSB among young people. We investigated participants' definitions and understandings of HSB and the causes of HSB and risk factors for experiencing and enacting HSB; examples of incidents they had been involved with; and the challenges entailed in prevention and response, including from a partnership and multiagency perspective.

Police were recruited through a senior officer from the force's evidence-based policing team, who identified and informed relevant teams and individuals about the study. School staff were recruited via a mail-out to all secondary schools in the local education authority area. The mail-out was facilitated by the lead headteacher for secondary school heads in the county, who shared details of the project with all schools. Ultimately, two schools were able to support the project. While we extended the invitation broadly, many schools were unable to participate due to capacity constraints and competing priorities.

Further service providers were identified and recruited via our existing stakeholder networks, which included contacts established through prior collaborations and professional engagements in child protection, education and online safety. Invitations were shared with these networks. Professionals with relevant expertise and experience volunteered for interviews. Finally, we used snowball sampling, whereby participants recommended further relevant organisations and individuals for us to contact.

We conducted a paired interview and group interview with adolescents in one of the schools. A paired interview was conducted with two Domestic Abuse Ambassadors; these young people played a role in educating and supporting their peers in school about domestic violence and abuse based on their own lived experiences. A group interview was held with seven adolescent girls, identified as at risk of or having experienced HSB and/or relationship abuse and had completed a school-based healthy relationships programme. These interviews explored participants' perspectives on HSB, the policing of HSB within schools, and the wider social context, focusing on prevention and responses to incidents. This school appeared to serve a relatively more socioeconomically disadvantaged cohort, with staff expressing concerns about the prevalence of domestic abuse within students' home lives. These concerns shaped the school's focus on addressing learned behaviours and vulnerabilities arising from such experiences. Consequently, the school's efforts around HSB prevention and response were closely tied to supporting students at risk of or affected by relationship abuse. This focus was reflected in the interviews and focus groups with young people. In contrast, less specific contextual information was available for the other school, which served a more affluent cohort. While differences in demographics and priorities may have influenced the findings, the data provided by police reflected their work across the county, offering a broader lens for understanding the policing of HSB beyond the immediate dynamics of these two schools.

During data collection, we engaged in extensive reflective notetaking and debriefed regularly to consider emerging insights. Data collection was iterative, with each interview exploring initial findings in greater depth. Early on, we identified tensions between policing objectives and strategies related to preventing and responding to HSB in schools, and youth engagement emerged as a distinct form of policing, which we continued to explore in further interviews. Once data collection was complete, we adopted Braun and Clarke's (2021) staged approach to thematic analysis of the qualitative data. Analysis focused on identifying key themes within the police interview data, while drawing on accounts from other participants to further elucidate the complexities. We focused on identifying patterns and tensions between various policing strategies rather than disaggregating the data into distinct codes.

Ethics approval was granted by our respective institutional ethics committees. The research adhered to professional ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity and implementing safeguarding measures. While personal identifying details were omitted from the study, participants were informed that the partnership with the local police service would be disclosed, and therefore their occupational roles and places of work could be indirectly identified. This transparency was part of obtaining informed consent. We took a trauma-informed approach to interviewing young people to ensure their safety and wellbeing. We provided full information about the study, conducted the interviews/groups with care and sensitivity and had in place protocols for monitoring and responding to concerns about participant well-being.

## 5 | Findings

Police involvement in preventing and responding to HSB in schools involved education informing young people about the law on sexual (mis)conduct and how to whom to report incidents, responses to incidents and remedial post-incident interventions designed to reduce the likelihood of future incidents. We explore the tensions in police–youth relations through the following themes: Good cop, bad cop: Conflicting roles in policing HSB; Relationship-based practice for surveillance and deterrence: Tensions in policing priorities; and Over promising and underdelivering: Discrepancies between educational content on legal categories and criminal justice processes and responses.

### 5.1 | Good Cop, Bad Cop: Conflicting Roles in Policing HSB

Police perspectives related to 'hard' policing—characterised by fear, surveillance and authority—and 'soft' policing, involving trauma-informed, relational responses. These approaches often coexisted within individual officers' practices, shaped by their professional roles and operational contexts. For example, the four High-Harm Perpetrator (HHPU) officers typically emphasised authority and deterrence when managing young people's behaviour. They expressed concerns about a perceived erosion of respect for police among young people, which they viewed as an obstacle to preventing HSB. This perspective was exemplified by one officer (HHPU2), who felt:

> ...kids aren't scared of the police anymore... there's no respect there... most kids have no regard or have



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> no concerns about the police and aren't scared by the prospect of getting into trouble or being spoken to by police...

This officer endorsed police involvement in preventative education about the law, believing that messages about the criminal consequences of HSB carry more weight when delivered by police:

> ...because at the end of the day, it [HSB] is a criminal offence... it does kind of confirm that and maybe is a bit more hard-hitting coming from a police officer than your teacher...

While acknowledging the need for dialogue with young people, their interactions were framed in terms of achieving policing objectives, such as detecting incidents and gathering intelligence:

> ...if they are committing an offence, you will deal with them... it's a tricky thing to get right... being approachable, but... strict enough that they're not going to take advantage or think that they can take advantage.

Youth Engagement Officers (YEOs) described more relationship-oriented, trauma-informed approaches. They emphasised empathy and support over fear and punishment, believing that creating trust and offering support to young people, particularly victims, was essential to effectively addressing HSB. YEO3, for instance, argued that strong cautions about the law can be counterproductive, as it may discourage young people from seeking help or reporting incidents:

> unfortunately, some of those young people in the classroom are going to be victims... if we're scaring them and... shocking them... I don't think it works... it's about having those conversations... to gain that trust and confidence within policing...

A young domestic abuse ambassador shared their discomfort with authoritarian policing, having been raised with the belief that "police are bad... never tell them anything. Never trust them." For this participant, police are 'terrifying', with their presence alone making them feel unjustly guilty: "I haven't done anything, but I feel really guilty... like you're telling me off...". Such sentiments were echoed by the girls with previous experience of HSB, who described police as potentially 'triggering'. A teacher likewise recommended that police avoiding appearing 'threatening or aggressive', noting that police make some young people feel scared and nervous, reducing the likelihood of them engaging with or listening to the officers.

Concerns about counterproductive policing approaches were expressed by a specialist working for a child protection charity regarding online image sharing:

> [Young people] are not going to... go and have a conversation with an adult about this, because they're going to immediately assume... they're going to get into lots of trouble... their digital devices are going to be taken away from them. So, they're just not going to [report] it.

Some officers recognised that focusing on the illegality of certain behaviours, including image-sharing, without addressing the emotional and contextual complexities of these situations, could alienate young people. Officers involved in youth engagement policing described adopting a trauma-informed perspective, emphasising that young people need reassurance and support, rather than fear, to feel comfortable reporting incidents and sharing their concerns.

The officer working in online child sexual abuse felt that simply warning young people about the law might make "victims... go to ground" and avoid reporting incidents due to fear of legal repercussions. This officer said young people "need to feel comfortable enough to report very personal matters without fear of judgment or reprisals" and not be concerned about: "...being in trouble because you've sent your 16-year-old boyfriend a picture that has then escalated into something way more than you ever thought it would." The online safety expert also endorsed a supportive approach, whereby officers offer reassurance: "...if I come forward, this isn't going to be the end of the world... people are going to support me; people don't want to criminalise me because I've done these things...".

In this context, youth engagement policing emerged as a distinct form of policing. A Youth Engagement Officer (YEO2), for example, identified different roles for the police, who: "...have... lots of different hats. We're not just there for criminal justice, we're there to help support young people in times of crisis and to make sure they know where to go for help and support...". While concerned it is typically considered a 'lesser' form of policing compared to 'hard' enforcement policing, these officers considered youth engagement to be highly skilled work, with YEO2 describing it as 'dangerous' for untrained officers, without effective communication skills, to work with young people. YEO2 emphasised 'empowering' young people to recognise and report HSB and "trying to make [young people] aware that they have a voice and if something doesn't make them feel right inside them, they need to tell us...". They highlighted cultural awareness and communication skills, as well as removing the potential symbolism of a police uniform as a barrier to engagement: "...you have to have a certain way about you... obviously don't go in uniform... you have to know what's going on, with regards to what's trending with regards to slang and terminology and different things like that."

Another Youth Engagement Officer (YEO1) framed prevention as going beyond 'talking at [young] people' about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour to look for 'signs and behaviours' indicating risk of HSB. This officer felt that effective youth engagement requires patience, especially when building trust with young people who may have negative attitudes towards the police, where:

> ...chance are it's going to take a very, very, very long time for any form of trust to be built... they might not



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> necessarily talk to you... you've got to have a lot of time and patience... particularly if that child has had a lot of trauma, to have any sort of trust.

These officers highlighted the potential damage to youth-police relationships when involved in enforcement actions, with YEO1 stating: "we don't want to... be seen to be the 'bad cop'... we want that young person to open up to us, we want them to trust us."

### 5.2 | Relationship-Based Practice for Surveillance and Deterrence: Tensions in Policing Priorities

Supportive, trauma-informed, relationship-based policing may, we found, be instrumentally deployed by police in schools to achieve policing objectives of intelligence gathering and detection, potentially undermining genuine mutuality and trust. For example, a High-Harm Perpetrator Officer (HHPU3) remarked (italics added for emphasis): "if we don't have relationships, we're not *getting the intelligence*... we're not identifying those victims who are too scared to ring up and tell us things." This perspective indicated a tactical approach to encouraging young people to disclose information:

> ...the kids would just talk, and they wouldn't know what they were saying... it would be absolutely priceless... you kind of play the role of Columbo, just having a silly conversation with them, but you're just getting information.

This officer also articulated an instrumental approach to engaging with Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) in schools. With little acknowledgment of young people's right to privacy, HHPU3 described DSLs as needing to keeping police informed, even when incidents do not meet the threshold for criminality: "[Schools] don't really understand the data they've got and just how valuable it is to police... if you get the DSL... who's really switched on, it can be absolutely priceless with the information they can give you."

Safeguarding and reporting duties and cultures within policing that blur boundaries between 'intelligence gathering', support and enforcement, further compromising delineation of policing roles. A Youth Engagement Officer (YEO1) remarked: "you're trying to get information from them to support and point them in the right direction, but they might disclose something you have to report as a crime...". Officers emphasised transparency and honesty in their interactions with young people, balancing disclosure duties with building trust through clear communication. Suggesting that 'intelligence gathering' may become fraught in practice, a High-Harm Perpetrator Officer (HHPU3), for instance, noted: "you could lose so much if you try and be smart and lie to a child" about keeping information confidential when often, police will need to record it and/or share it further.

Relationship-based practice was also deployed to prevent and deter HSB. For example, an officer specialising in online child sexual abuse described "going in [to schools] regularly and talking... to young people" to identify "how can we make things better from a policing point of view?" This officer recommended allowing "young people [to] speak to us and give us the information instead of us thinking that we know and telling them". However, they expressed that such strategies primarily help police learn how to prevent behaviours they seek to deter, such as young people's involvement in 'nude image sharing'. They referred to finding ways to 'stop them sharing an image' revealing a persistence of top-down imposition of acceptable conduct, whereby the police determine the objective and learn from young people how best to achieve it.

A Youth Engagement Officer (YEO4) preferred to implement such strategies through early engagement, whereby they later reinforce deterrence messages already delivered. Referring to sexual image sharing, this officer felt that having worked with young people from primary school is helpful, because it enables them to say: "...you met me like a year ago, two years ago, we had this discussion, what's going on?... we could all pull back to the fact that you knew you shouldn't be doing this, and this was wrong". Another Youth Engagement Officer (YEO3) similarly argued that constructive police-youth interactions enable officers to learn how to "change [young] people's mindsets." Adopting an essentialising perspective on adolescence, YEO3 described young people as fundamentally different from adults, claiming: "teenage brains... work hugely different to us as adults... what we think they need to know and what will dissuade them... might be completely opposite."

Despite an empathetic and supportive stance, youth engagement police remained, therefore, framed and enacted within a framework of surveillance and control, albeit through softer, more dialogical methods. The goal of these interactions often remained aligned with policing objectives—intelligence gathering, crime prevention and behavioural regulation—framed in terms of care and support.

### 5.3 | Overpromising and Underdelivering: Discrepancies Between Educational Content on Legal Categories and Criminal Justice Timescales, Processes and Responses

Participants generally endorsed embedding police within holistic, multi-agency approaches to preventing and responding to HSB, emphasising that police should work alongside other experts. A Youth Engagement Officer (YEO3) described the importance of a clear demarcation between different agencies, highlighting the legal aspects of police work while recognising that issues around consent and HSB extend beyond the law: "Legally, it may be 'very black or white'... but the 'intricacies' of consent are not a law thing... that's a relationship thing".

Police officers frequently recognised these limitations of the law in accounting for the nuances of young people's agency and development, particularly regarding 'underage' sexual activity. A High-Harm Perpetrator Officer (HHPU1) reflected on the mismatch between law and practice: "[Sexual activity between two 14-year-olds] ...give it two, three years, and there's no police involvement whatsoever... it's 'age-appropriate'. It's just a little bit too early... [according to the law]." Police were reconciling the tensions through public-interest and proportionality considerations, especially when the activity is deemed otherwise



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consensual. They described balancing their duty to enforce the law while avoiding undue criminalisation of young people for normative adolescent behaviour. They struggled with this particularly when dealing with image sharing. A High-Harm Perpetrator Officer (HHPU3) said that prosecution was rarely in the public interest in such cases:

> ...Am I going to gain anything? Is it in the public interest to prosecute a 13-year-old child... who sent an image of their genitalia?... I can offer safeguarding and tell that child not to do it again without putting them through the court system.

While this diversionary approach aims to avoid criminalising young people, it creates ambiguity for young people around the boundaries of legal behaviour when the messages they receive are absent of nuance. A High-Harm Perpetrator Officer (HHPU2) described this tension as difficult to navigate, especially when trying to encourage victims of image-based abuse to come forward while maintaining a deterrent message (italics added for emphasis):

> ...it's hard, because you want to say to them... it's not you taking that photo... that we're going to be dealing with criminally, but the person that sent it on... you don't want them to think, '*I'm not going to be in trouble, so I'll do whatever I want*.'

Adopting a more victim-centred approach, a Youth Engagement Officer (YEO1) described challenges arising from victim ambivalence about pursuing a case when leading to informal outcomes like 'No Further Action': "...if the victim is saying... I want them to have words given to them, but I don't actually want to get them into trouble... we're left with no choice [but for No Further Action]." Another officer (YEO3) was concerned that when "... there's no further action. That says to people, well, nothing's happening. Actually, there could be other things going on in the background... we've got to be better at explaining [our actions and reasoning]". A High-Harm Perpetrator Officer (HHPU4) was concerned that lack of clarity contributions to mistrust among young poeple: "...we keep saying, if this happens, you need to report, and then they do report, and then nothing happens... that breaks their confidence that there's any point."

Police recognised the risk of overpromising and underdelivering, particularly as long timescales in investigations further damage trust and wellbeing. For young people, professional timescales may feel particularly lengthy, given relationships can be fast-moving. Girls who reported HSB described feeling let down by the system, with one girl explaining how police delays caused unnecessary stress and disappointment:

> ...it's all blown over... you should forget about it. And then they bring it all back up, and it's like you're just sat there wondering what's going to happen, and then nothing happened.

Another girl referred to 'false promises', creating a deep sense of disillusionment with police: "I was worried about what was going to happen. And then they just came back on nothing... and like they didn't even speak to the person, or whatever."

Some police officers expressed doubts about the effectiveness of reporting. Two female officers expressed hesitation to personally report sexual offending due to systemic delays and inefficiencies, for example: "...unless it was something really serious, I probably wouldn't report it to the police... because there's no staff, it will just take an absolute age..." which is a damning indictment While not being a reassuring message to share with young people, a High-Harm Perpetrator Officer (HHPU4) felt transparency is important:

> There [are] just too many delays throughout the whole process. Because even if you've got enough, evidentially, to pursue the case... the officer [needs] to have enough time to build a... case... which takes a long time... then there's delays in the court process... it's just being realistic with young people... without being really negative.

A teacher, likewise, felt all they could do is provide support to young people, during what will inevitably be a difficult reporting and investigation process:

> ...reassuring them—because there's always this fear of, well, if I tell someone, it's gonna... get worse—... sometimes, it does get worse, nine times out of 10, if you tell someone about it... it probably will get worse before it gets better. But sometimes we have to ride the storm before the fairer weather comes... that's kind of tough to deal with, because... you've done the right thing. But I'm telling you now, that's probably before it gets better. In that period of it being worse, this is where your support is, and you must come and continue to tell me...

Participants expressed frustration with the inability of police to provide timely and meaningful responses. A Youth Engagement Officer (YEO1) summarised: "...we're setting the kids up to fail... asking them to trust you... they do it, you failed them... you're not only letting the victims down, you're also letting the perpetrators down." A practitioner working with young people involved in HSB echoed this concern regarding those accused of HSB: "...being accused of something like that had led to... social isolation... which then obviously impacts upon mental health and other aspects of their life." They elaborated on "at least two examples" whereby "...being accused of it [HSB] and going through a police investigation has had such a detrimental effect... it's actually become a social issue for them." Other participants were concerned about long timescales, whereby investigations drag on, leaving young people—complainants and accused—in limbo.

In a context of limited resourcing and lack of availability of appropriate services, participants were concerned about overreliance on police interventions, emphasising the need for alternative ways of preventing harmful behaviours from escalating.



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A Youth Engagement Officer (YEO1), for instance, criticised the current system where police involvement often precedes other support services:

> You'd think it would be the police doing it after [after services have provided support] ...because you've hit that point where you need a [criminal justice] intervention... but it's not, it's the other way around.

They described a pressure on police not to unduly criminalise children but without other interventions "you're then ending up with an adult who is then having these tendencies that we could have prevented from happening when they were a child." Reflecting the emphasis on policing as a mechanism of deterrence, they said:

> ...kids aren't stupid... They know that they don't get prosecuted... police aren't going to do anything, and they continue with their behaviour... [adult offenders] if you looked at their history as a child, they should have been dealt with a long time ago.

While emphasising deterrence through enforcement, they expressed deeper malaise about how young people are and should be supported:

> ...that young person... could have had early intervention and early support and help... if we just go in, no further action... we're then letting them continue with their behaviour... sometimes, the reason they're doing these things... behaving the way they are, is because they're crying out for help. You've got it on both sides. If you do nothing, then you're enabling and you're then letting the victims down as well. So, what do you do?

## 6 | Discussion

Through a Foucauldian framework, we interpret police practices in schools as mechanisms of discipline and surveillance. By situating participants' accounts within discourses of authority, youth-adult relations, and disciplinary management of young people, we identify contradictions between principles of relationship-based policing and its implementation, whereby procedural justice narratives of fairness and legitimacy are coupled with an emphasis on compliance and control. Our findings contribute to understanding how policing practices in schools reflect and extend broader disciplinary cultures, shaped by policing and school policy frameworks prioritising behaviour management and surveillance over genuine support and empowerment for young people. We align with critical perspectives questioning whether relationship-based policing is truly designed to empower young people or merely extends surveillance practices into softer forms of engagement (Henshall 2018; Joseph-Salisbury 2021; Lloyd et al. 2023).

In accordance with a Foucauldian conceptualisation of "the subject [as] neither a 'role' nor an 'individual' but a multiplicity of positions which are contradictory and discontinuous" (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2017, 112), we found that officers spoke of being approachable and supportive, but this was oftentimes framed in terms of gaining access to information and identifying and deterring criminal behaviour. Although most young people who enact HSB do not go on to offend sexually as an adult (Leonard and Hackett 2019), from the perspective of some officers, adult sexual offending may be prevented through early interventions, providing a further rationale for policing in schools. Foucault's concept of discipline illuminates how relationship-based practices, when instrumentalised to achieve surveillance, intelligence-gathering and deterrence objectives, reinforce hierarchical power dynamics, constrain young people's autonomy and embed state authority within school environments. From this perspective, a facade of trust enables police monitoring and management of behaviour. Officers may engage in casual conversations with young people, but their *real goal* is crime control. While some officers framed these strategies through narratives of identifying and supporting victims, there was also emphasis on control.

This dynamic exposes a potentially cynical use of procedural justice, whereby the emphasis on fairness and legitimacy in police-youth relations is hollowed out by the underlying focus on control. Officers may, for instance, seek to build relationships and be responsive to young people, but these are often instrumental tools to ensure compliance, gather intelligence, and influence and manage young people's behaviours and attitudes, rather than involving genuine, non-hierarchical connections with young people. Officers involved in supporting young people thus remain embedded in a policing culture that prioritises surveillance and intelligence gathering, highlighting the difficulty reconciling 'care' with 'control'. Conflicting priorities, whereby police are both supporters and enforcers, present inherent tensions of policing HSB in schools, raising questions about whether police can fully enact both roles and the implications of police presence in schools for trust.

These tensions are particularly stark in the context of HSB, where legal frameworks addressing sexual (mis)conduct through criminal justice mechanisms are often inadequate. HSB encompasses serious criminal offences to ambiguous conduct that falls into legal grey areas. Yet, police often resort to treating HSB through the same lens—prioritising deterrence and legal consequences even when these measures, by their own acknowledgment, are not appropriate or effective. Officers were reluctant to be transparent about the scope of the law and criminal justice and their own practices of discretion, lest it undermine deterrence objectives. The tension was recognised in the case of image-based sexual abuse; participants recognised that victims may not report if they fear they too may be punished for initially sharing images. While officers endeavoured to tell young people not to be afraid of reporting, they were reluctant to dilute messages designed to deter and limit all image sharing, undermining victim support through creating a barrier to reporting while offering a shield to those enacting abuse who may exploit a victim's fear of personally getting into trouble.

There was a corresponding lack of curiosity as to why young people may act in ways they have been told are risky and illegal, such as sharing images. Lesko (1996) critiques the politics



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of adolescence as a constructed and contested category, arguing that representations of adolescents often emphasise immaturity, impulsivity and irrationality, positioning them as a group requiring management and control by adults. In this context, dialogue and responsiveness to are shaped not by mutual understanding but by an adultist view of young people as deviant 'other.' Police engagement with young people aims to bridge these supposed gaps to achieve deterrence objectives, reinforcing the broader critique that youth engagement policing, while ostensibly relational, remains tethered to surveillance and control.

There is a risk of 'dull compulsion' Tankebe, (2013), whereby young people perform deference to police, giving the appearance of compliance, while simultaneously harbouring distrust, cynicism and a reluctance to engage. This dynamic reflects how procedural justice can fail to create genuine legitimacy, instead reinforcing hierarchical power structures that mask disengagement. While youth engagement officers expressed victim-centred orientations to information gathering, if young people view interactions between themselves and police—or, indeed, police and other authorities—as manipulative rather than supportive, it may create a sense of discomfort, jeopardising the goals of trust-building. The element of manipulation and coerciveness in the drive to build relationships could, furthermore, undermine the role of police in modelling healthy relationships to young people.

These tensions unfold amid a crisis of legitimacy in policing. Young people who report incidents of HSB have been let down by slow, inconsistent and opaque responses from police, coupled with a lack of clear communication, especially in terms of cases of NFA. Delays fail to deliver justice for victims while risking re-victimisation by dragging out the investigative process. Participants acknowledged the impact on young people's trust in the system, with this disconnect between legal promises and policing realities undermining perceptions of legitimacy and further alienating those they aim to protect. Failure to deliver timely and transparent responses to HSB complaints may exacerbate young people's reluctance to report incidents in the future, feeding into a cycle of disengagement and mistrust, while giving a general impression that HSB goes unaddressed.

In addressing the tensions, we propose a shift towards supporting young people's sexual citizenship York et al. (2021). Rather than relying on legal deterrence and surveillance, engagements should acknowledge the complexities—and thus limitations of the law in fully guiding—sexual relationships, consent and ethical conduct. Through sexual citizenship, police, in partnership with schools, can move beyond binary categories of legal/illegal conduct and engage with young people in developing a shared understanding of ethical sexual behaviour, including at the intersections of binary categories. This shift would enable officers to support young people in making informed, responsible decisions without relying solely on punitive measures. As Lloyd (2019) argues, creating a culture of safety for young people requires moving beyond surveillance to foster environments that empower them to actively shape the conditions of their sexual relationships rather than have these dictated or managed by adults. This necessitates adults accepting young people's right to sexual agency, experimentation and the space to make mistakes, including through supportive and empathetic relationship-based practice.

Building relationships should not just be utilised to gather intelligence but also to support young people's development. Police can articulate the scope—and limitations—of legal frameworks while supporting young people navigate ethical complexities of sexual conduct with autonomy and responsibility. This requires reorienting police roles and objectives away from deterrence and surveillance and towards supporting the holistic development of young people's sexual health and rights, necessitating a cultural shift in the policing of HSB. Reliance on legal deterrence and surveillance is ineffective and counterproductive when undermining trust and engagement with young people, potentially hindering its own objectives. Contradictions between relationship-based practices and policing objectives reflect deeper structural issues within legal frameworks and police culture. Moving beyond controlling behaviour through surveillance and embracing a model of engagement that supports young people's sexual citizenship requires training, resources and a re-thinking of how police interact with young people in educational settings. Relationship-building should, we argue, be decoupled from surveillance and focus on supporting young people's rights and growth, with police training to operate in educational settings without defaulting to authoritarian surveillance methods.

There is also a need to address the school policy frameworks that focus on behaviour management and discipline, given policing cultures of surveillance, control and intelligence gathering do not operate in isolation. Police presence in schools may function alongside broader disciplinary school cultures that privilege order and control rather than empowering young people. The discursive policy terrain in England constructs HSB as a behavioural issue that must be managed Setty et al. (2024), meaning police are utilised to support this agenda. School policies, including zero-tolerance approaches to misconduct, create an environment where young people are increasingly subject to adult surveillance and control Lloyd et al. (2023). The outsourcing of authority to police exacerbates these dynamics, as schools lean on police for enforcement rather than creating spaces of trust and support. Systemic interactions between policing and school cultures create feedback loops, where authoritarian policing practices are normalised, and schools become sites of surveillance. This entrenches the problem of policing young people, reinforcing power imbalances and undermining young people's rights and autonomy. Without addressing the broader school policy landscape, changes to policing alone will be insufficient to meaningfully improve responses to HSB in schools.

## 7 | Concluding Thoughts

This study highlights inherent contradictions and tensions in the policing of HSB in schools, where relationship-based practices are often entangled with surveillance and control objectives. Through a Foucauldian lens, we show how these practices reinforce disciplinary mechanisms that constrain young people's autonomy and undermine trust. While officers articulated aspirations for care and support, these were frequently subordinated to broader institutional priorities of intelligence gathering, deterrence and



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compliance. This duality reflects deeper structural issues within both policing and school policy frameworks, where the emphasis on behaviour management and discipline reinforces surveillance cultures.

Addressing these challenges requires rethinking the role of police in schools and the broader policy landscape governing responses to HSB. Moving beyond deterrence and surveillance, we advocate for a focus on supporting young people's sexual citizenship—centred on ethical, rights-based approaches that empower young people to navigate complex socio-sexual dynamics with autonomy and responsibility. This requires systemic changes, including improved training for police officers, reorientation of school policies towards trust-building and empowerment and greater collaboration between schools, police and other agencies to support young people holistically.

Ultimately, creating safer and more supportive school environments necessitates disentangling the care-control nexus in policing and reframing relationships with young people to prioritise their rights, agency and development. This shift addresses the limitations of current approaches while creating conditions for more meaningful and effective responses to HSB that align with the lived realities and developmental needs of young people.

### Ethics Statement

The research received Favourable Ethical Opinion from the University of Surrey Ethics Committee. Informed consent was received from all participants, with parental consent also obtained for participants aged under 16.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

Anonymised data available from the authors upon reasonable request.

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