

Perceptions of the police: a generational crisis of confidence?

Several trends in public opinion now suggest confidence in the police has worsened and that perceptions among Gen Z (those born since 1996) in particular are reaching new lows.

What the World Values Survey shows

Long-term data from the World Values Survey – one of the largest and most widely used academic social surveys in the world – shows 87% of Britons reported having confidence in the police in 1981. But by 2022, this was down to 67%, similar to its previous low point of 68% in 2009.

Perhaps more worrying, a clear generational break in attitudes appears to be emerging: Gen Z (44%) are the only generation in Britain where less than half report having confidence in the police – far below other cohorts, around seven in 10 of whom all said the same in 2022.

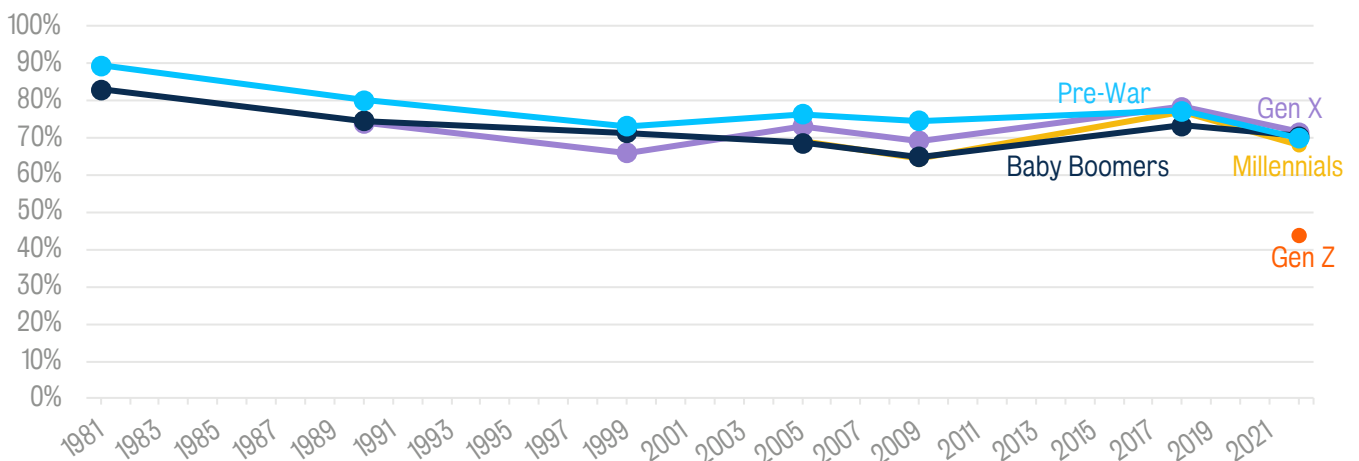
Context

The UK's model of law enforcement was founded on a principle of 'policing by consent', with the authority of the police believed to stem from the consent and cooperation of the public they serve, rather than the power of the state. Without public support, the authority and legitimacy of the police would be in jeopardy – and there are worrying signs this is under pressure, particularly with younger generations.¹

Gen Z are the only generation in Britain where less than half report having confidence in the police

Years of birth for generations

Gen Z: 1996 onwards | Millennials: 1980-1995 | Gen X: 1966-1979 | Baby Boomers: 1945-1965 | Pre-War: 1944 or earlier



Further statistical analysis by the Policy Institute shows this 'cohort effect' remains when you control for other demographic characteristics: this not just driven by the more diverse profile of younger generations.

As the chart shows, this is a new pattern: Millennials and Gen X had similar levels of confidence as older generations when they first came into the adult population in the mid-2000s and late-1980s. Concern has often been expressed in the past that the police are losing connection to young people, but this is the first cohort where that is backed up by the data.

The World Values Survey covers over 80 countries, allowing for international comparisons that show this pattern of Gen Z alone having much lower confidence than older generations is unique.

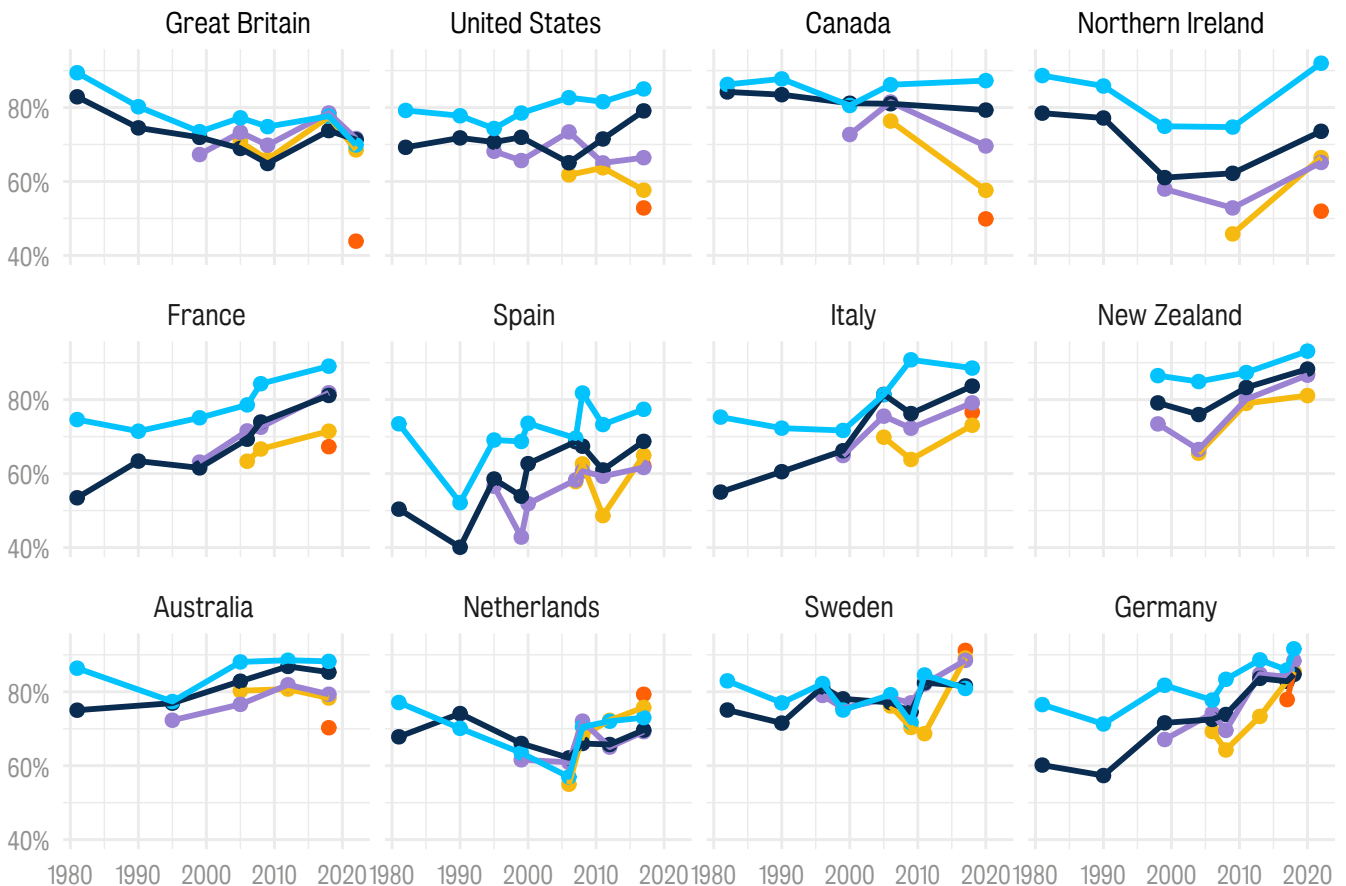
There are several countries where there is clear declining confidence with each generation (the US, Canada, Northern Ireland, and to a lesser degree France, Spain and Italy), but there are other nations where there are no notable generational differences (Netherlands, Sweden and Germany).

The US, Canada and Northern Ireland stand out in particular, where there is a pattern of generation-on-generation declines in confidence in the police: it is important to act on what could be the first sign of this in Britain with Gen Z, before it becomes embedded.

More generally, these comparisons show that the overall decline in confidence in the police seen in Great Britain is not the norm, with many countries seeing flat or rising levels.

Britain's declining confidence in the police isn't the norm

Gen Z | Millennials | Gen X | Baby Boomers | Pre-War



What other research shows

The Crime Survey for England and Wales is another key source of data. Changes in methodology mean reliable trends exist only for the past decade, yet they still suggest a worsening of perceptions: overall confidence in local police declined from 75% in 2011/12 to 68% in 2022/23.²

Other sources indicate a pronounced shift in young people's views in recent years. YouGov data shows that in 2019 18- to 24-year-olds were the age group most likely to say they had a lot or fair amount of confidence in the police (64%), but by 2022 they had become *least* likely (42%) – behind all others surveyed.³

Why this is happening, and policy implications

There are many possible explanations for declining confidence in the police among the public overall. Polling shows that large sections of the public feel the police are not visible enough on the streets, that anti-social behaviour is not taken seriously, and that the police are corrupt or racist, which is no doubt linked to recent prominent cases of misconduct by officers.⁴

And among victims of crime, high proportions are not satisfied with the police response, while there is also a broader sense that the police have simply given up on tackling crime, with recorded crime at a 20-year high in 2022 and the proportion of crimes solved at an all-time low.^{5 6 7}

However, less attention has been paid to the specific generational break we are seeing. This is likely to be related to differences in direct experience (for example, in stop and search) and in media or social media consumption, with high-profile incidents of police failings becoming more visible to younger generations given their significantly higher social media use, alongside greater engagement with movements that originated in the US, such as Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police.⁸

These high-profile incidents are likely to have a greater impact on younger people, not just because of greater exposure, but because they are at a more formative stage of life, where views are more malleable. This younger generation have also grown up through a time of constrained police budgets and general withdrawal of policing from the community, which is likely to have left a relational vacuum compared with earlier generations: there is much less grounding in personal experience to protect the police from negative impacts to their reputation from high-profile incidents.

One important point to note is Gen Z are not simply more distrustful of institutions in general, despite a common myth that young people enter adulthood more suspicious than older generations. The police and the courts are the two institutions where Gen Z's level of confidence is most significantly lower than the population as a whole. In contrast, Gen Z have similar levels of confidence in parliament and political parties compared with older generations. This is something specific: faith in criminal justice institutions is a key problem for younger generations.

Evidence suggests there are two main areas in which to focus efforts aimed at improving confidence in the police among young people.

Improving perceptions of procedural justice among younger generations

While tackling crime is the core job of the police, evidence indicates it plays only a limited role in influencing public confidence. Instead, perceptions of the extent to which police are 'procedurally just' in how they operate – in other words, whether they treat individuals with respect and dignity, in an unbiased and trustworthy way, and allow them to explain their side of the story – are more important.

One systematic review concluded: '...assessments of the police are improved when citizens report feeling treated in a more procedurally just manner by the police' – a finding that applies across a

range of countries and demographic groups, including by age.^{9 10}

While much research has focused on the impact of procedural justice on adults, some studies do suggest it may be even more important among young people, improving their cooperation with and perceptions of the police.^{11 12}

With this in mind, stop and search powers are particularly important: if they are perceived to be used disproportionately or unfairly, then this will undermine the principle of procedurally just policing. This is especially relevant to confidence in the police among young people, given two-thirds (66%) of all stop and searches in the year ending March 2022 were carried out on people aged between 10 and 29 years old, which is a pretty close match to the current Gen Z age range.¹³

Of course, stop and search only directly affects a relatively small proportion of young people, where their experience of crime reporting, crowd control and even online interactions will all affect perceptions – but the indirect effects from the sharing of negative stop and search experiences with friends, and the coverage of this online, will also be significant.

Improving transparency and accountability around the use of stop and search should therefore be a key consideration for policymakers. Crest Advisory has called on the Home Office to establish an independent national taskforce that could drive improvements in stop and search practices by developing minimum standards in areas such as training, guidance and vetting of officers, as well as communication and engagement with communities in which stop and search powers are frequently used.¹⁴

It also recommends that community scrutiny panels – which allow community members to review individual police interactions with the public – recruit young people who have been stopped and searched, in an effort to ensure the panels are representative of those most affected by the practice.¹⁵

Community policing focused on young people

Building community relationships, involving citizens in problem-solving and increasing the visibility of patrols are core elements of community policing approaches, which have been shown to be effective in improving public confidence in the police.^{16 17 18 19}

For example, a systematic review found that, following community policing interventions, ‘citizens reported increased trust and confidence in the police...and felt that they treated people more fairly (increased legitimacy).’²⁰

Indeed, WVS data, as well as the Crime Survey for England and Wales, shows a rare upward tick in public confidence in the police between the 2000s and 2010s – a time when there was a concerted focus on neighbourhood policing and confidence targets, which may in part have contributed to the shift. This suggests decline is not inevitable – but also shows the prolonged effort required, as opposed to the current tendency to consider action in relation to each individual incident. This is a much more endemic challenge.

Political parties recognise the importance of policing levels and connections to communities, with the Conservative manifesto promising to ‘recruit 8,000 more full-time, fully warranted police officers to ensure a new police officer for every neighbourhood’ and Labour’s to recruit ‘thousands’, introduce a ‘Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee’ and have a named officer for communities to turn to. The challenge is to deliver on these in straitened financial times.

Research also points to the effectiveness of community-based approaches that are tailored for young people specifically. One randomised controlled trial involving 81 schools across England and Wales evaluated the impact of training officers to deliver lessons in schools on issues such as drugs and the law, finding that the programme increased confidence in the police among young people.²¹ Police engagement in schools is, however, contested, and needs to be approached carefully, with an emphasis on educational roles

and with significant preparation and support: done badly, it can be counter-productive.

Another example – the ‘mini-police’ initiative – originated in Durham and aims ‘to introduce children to a positive experience of policing and to get them involved in the local community’. The programme, in which children learn about policing issues and undertake volunteering activity in support of a local police priority, has been found to have a positive impact on children’s trust in the police.²²

International evidence also suggests community engagement can promote better youth perceptions of police. One US study found the greatest improvement in attitudes among young people who had prior negative experience with the police,²³ while another US evaluation of community-police dialogue events found young people who attended the sessions experienced significantly larger improvements in feelings of voice, trust, respect and empathy than adults.²⁴

Ensuring young people are not excluded from community policing approaches and have positive interactions with police in their neighbourhood will therefore be important in changing perceptions.

However, such approaches need to be properly implemented and given priority. The Police Foundation’s 2022 Strategic Review of Policing noted that, while there is strong evidence for the effectiveness of community policing in improving public confidence in the police, such engagement with local neighbourhoods has been cut back significantly since 2010. It called on the Home Office to ask police forces to deliver a ‘substantial uplift’ in community policing, deploying a significant proportion of new officers recruited in recent years to carry out such work.²⁵

More specifically, the Foundation’s assessment in 2018 was that the current policing response to young adults is not suitable, and that while there are pockets of good practice across the country that provide the basis for a tailored approach, efforts need to be more systematically evaluated and applied.²⁶

Hence a clearer picture is needed of what works, with more rigorous testing and piloting of interventions, followed by greater joining up and coordination of police-youth engagement efforts that are shown to be effective.

There is also a need to be realistic about what can be achieved given strained public finances and competing policy priorities. As such, efforts should be made to assess the cost-effectiveness of programmes and ensure any improvements in young people’s confidence in the police translate into long-term savings through reduced social costs and better use of police time.

This new World Values Survey data appears to show we are at a generational tipping point in confidence in the police, and recognising and acting on that quickly is vital to avoiding an engrained trend that could soon prove much more destructive and costly.

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