

BRIEFING DOCUMENT.

Excavating 'vulnerability', reclaiming resilience and unlocking human flourishing.

The concept of vulnerability has become a fast-emerging area of focus and demand for criminal justice agencies and multi agency partners in local government, education, health, the third sector and elsewhere. Yet within this arena the term 'vulnerability' has not been clearly defined (Parley, 2011), and different conceptions and definitions of the term are routinely mobilised by different partners and commentators. Fineman (2010) refers to vulnerability as a universal concept that is inherent in all people, while others suggest that placing people in categories of vulnerability ignores the social context within which it has emerged (Green, 2007) and creates artificial constructs suggestive of inherent weaknesses amongst specific groups (Chakraborti and Garland, 2012).

Despite these issues, the concept of vulnerability has been adopted whole-heartedly by law enforcement and partner agencies to refer to the elevated risks that 'vulnerable' people, families and communities face. Yet it is evident that to be at risk - or even to have been victimised - does not equate with being 'vulnerable' since, in many instances, vulnerability is a structural condition and not one inherent to the person, family or community involved (Das, 2007: Walklate 2011). Therefore, any definition applied to vulnerability is at risk of ignoring the fluidity and multi-layered nature of this concept and imposes a normative understanding. This potentially grants some populations, and importantly not others, special treatment in encounters with the criminal justice system and related agencies. Those who are most likely to be victimised (the young, economically marginal, ethnic minority males) are also those least likely to be identified as vulnerable and thus treated as such (Green, 2007). Taking these issues into account, the term 'vulnerability' is in danger of falling victim to the same issues raised about the terms 'risk' and 'resilience', in that it becomes an over-used concept and policy objective that is applied in such a way that the social harms it seeks to expose become redefined as individual weaknesses.

In an effort to avoid its inevitable demise, it is necessary to not only explore what vulnerabilities are, but also to identify the ways in which they are created. Only then will we be able to identify the resources necessary to reduce vulnerability and unlock the potential for human flourishing.

In this context we have very deliberately conceived of this project as a process of **excavating** 'vulnerability', delving below the surface of the term, to identify, explore, interrogate and re-imagine the various underlying layers and strata of meaning, interpretation, operationalisation and understanding that may shape the everyday lived experience of the implementation of the concept by agencies and their 'clients'.

This approach builds on the innovative work of an interdisciplinary team of academics here at Keele, who are working with external partners to co-design new research, and co-create new knowledge, understanding and interventions in the broader landscape of vulnerability, inclusion, resilience and human flourishing across North Staffordshire.

As part of our innovative approach we see a key role for an artist/cultural creator/maker. This is a role designed to challenge - to shift all partners (including academics) out of our collective comfort zone, to get us to identify and reflect on our own preconceptions and assumptions, to defamiliarise current practices and concepts and to begin to co-create new approaches to vulnerability. Equally importantly, this is a role designed to engage with those individuals, families and communities often labelled as 'vulnerable'. Do they recognise themselves in that label? What else needs to be done to support these individuals, families and communities to flourish? The residency could also explore the exposure of existing vulnerabilities (e.g. minimum income guarantee, insecure employment, SME fragility) in the face of COVID-19.

