

Ambivalence, Denial, and Adaptive Responses to Vulnerable Suspects in Police Custody: The New Limits of the Sovereign State

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Abstract : This paper examines current state strategies for dealing with vulnerable people in police custody and identifies the underpinning discourses and practices which inform these strategies. It has previously been argued that the state has utilised contradictory and conflicting responses to the control of crime, by employing opposing strategies of denial and adaptation in order to simultaneously both display sovereignty and disclaim responsibility. This paper argues that these contradictory strategies are still being employed in contemporary criminal justice, although the focus and the purpose have now shifted. The focus is upon the 'vulnerable' suspect, whose social identity is as incongruous, complex and contradictory as his social environment, and the purpose is to redirect attention away from negative state practices, whilst simultaneously displaying a compassionate and benevolent countenance in order to appeal to the voting public. The findings presented here result from intensive qualitative research with police officers, with health care professionals, and with civilian volunteers who work within police custodial environments. The data has been gathered over a three-year period and includes observational and interview data which has been thematically analysed to expose the underpinning mechanisms from which the properties of the system emerge. What is revealed is evidence of contemporary state practices of denial relating to the harms of austerity and the structural relations of vulnerability, whilst simultaneously adapting through processes of 'othering' of the vulnerable, 'responsibilisation' of citizens, defining deviance down through diversionary practices, and managing success through redefining the aims of the system. The 'vulnerable' suspect is subject to individual pathologising, and yet the nature of risk is aggregated. 'Vulnerable' suspects are supported in police custody by private citizens, by multi-agency partnerships, and by for-profit organisations, while the state seeks to collate and control services, and thereby to retain a veneer of control. Late modern ambivalence to crime control and the associated contradictory practices of abjuration and adjustment have extended to state responses to vulnerable suspects. The support available in the custody environment operates to control and minimise operational and procedural risk, rather than for the welfare of the detained person, and in fact, the support available is discovered to be detrimental to the very people that it claims to benefit. The 'vulnerable' suspect is now subject to the bifurcated logics employed at the new limits of the sovereign state.

Keywords : custody, policing, sovereign state, vulnerability

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