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TOXIC CULTURE, MENTAL HEALTH,
AND NEURODIVERSITY IN UK POLICING



Toxic Culture, Mental Health, and Neurodiversity in UK Policing

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Introduction

In October 2025, *BBC Panorama*'s investigation [Undercover in the Police](#) (Adrian Polglase, Joseph Lee & Rory Bibb, *BBC News*, 1 Oct 2025) exposed shocking evidence of racism, misogyny and violence among serving Metropolitan Police officers at **Charing Cross Police Station**. Covert filming showed officers joking about rape, calling immigrants “scum,” describing Muslims as a “serious problem,” and boasting of “stamping” on detainees. One custody sergeant, **Joe McIlvenny**, dismissed a pregnant woman's rape and assault allegation with the phrase, “*That's what she says.*”

After the BBC presented its evidence, Commissioner **Sir Mark Rowley** suspended nine officers and one staff member and referred the case to the **Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC)**. Rowley called the behaviour “disgraceful, totally unacceptable and contrary to the values and standards of the force.” Yet the scandal followed the **Casey Review (2023)**, which concluded that the Met is *institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic*, and an earlier IOPC inquiry that found similar misconduct at the same station.

The Panorama revelations expose not isolated misconduct but a **culture of denial**—a system that conceals prejudice and discourages psychological honesty. They also intersect with a broader, under-acknowledged crisis: policing's poor grasp of **mental health** and **neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs)** such as ADHD and autism, both within the workforce and in the communities it polices.

1 The Culture of Denial and Psychological Harm

Policing demands emotional resilience, but the Panorama footage demonstrates how the profession's “toughness” has curdled into cruelty. Officers joked about rape, glorified force, and shared violent fantasies over drinks. PC Phil Neilson was recorded saying of an immigrant detainee, “*Either put a bullet through his head or deport him... and the ones that rape women, do the cock and let them bleed out.*” (BBC Panorama, 2025).

Former Nottinghamshire Chief Constable **Sue Fish**, reviewing the footage, described “a highly toxic culture of hyper-sexualised male behaviour, misogyny, racism and gratuitous unlawful violence.” She warned that officers like these hold power over women’s safety—“and that is terrifying.”

Such normalised contempt corrodes psychological safety. It silences empathy, ridicules vulnerability and punishes dissent. Officers experiencing trauma or struggling with neurodivergent traits are unlikely to seek help in an environment that equates emotion with weakness. The same desensitisation that trivialises victims also blinds the organisation to its own mental-health crisis.

2 Neurodevelopmental Disorders and Hidden Disabilities in Policing

Neurodevelopmental disorders—including ADHD, autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia—affect attention, impulse control and communication. Many adults, including police officers, are diagnosed late in life. These conditions can enhance certain policing skills—focus, creativity, rapid decision-making—but may cause difficulties with bureaucracy, sensory overload or shift-pattern disruption.

Despite this, **no UK police force has a dedicated policy for ADHD or autism**, relying instead on generic disability procedures. Freedom-of-information data from the Met confirm the absence of specialist guidance or proactive screening.

Parliament has recently acknowledged the issue. In a [House of Commons debate on 10 June 2025](#) MP Elliot Colburn stated:

“It is appalling that great institutions such as the British Army, the RAF, the Royal Navy and the police actively discriminate against people with ADHD and simply will not employ them.”

Such exclusionary practice breaches the **Equality Act 2010**, which obliges employers to make reasonable adjustments for disabled staff. Within the police, officers who disclose ADHD risk being sidelined or labelled unreliable. Those undiagnosed often face misconduct proceedings for “attitude problems” or “poor discipline” stemming from untreated symptoms. The result is a hidden attrition of neurodivergent talent and a deepening sense of stigma.

3 Policing the Neurodivergent Public

The consequences extend far beyond the workforce. People with ADHD and autism are disproportionately likely to come into contact with police—often during crisis episodes. According to a [Hansard debate on 1 July 2025](#), while roughly 4 % of the general population meet ADHD criteria, **up to 25 % of prisoners may be affected**. MPs warned that ADHD, when unsupported, “is a potent route into educational failure, unemployment, crime, substance misuse and suicide.”

For frontline officers, this means that many detainees exhibit behaviours—restlessness, poor eye contact, emotional dysregulation—that can be mistaken for aggression or deceit. In an environment like Charing Cross, where Panorama showed officers boasting of violence and mocking suspects, such misunderstandings can escalate quickly. The detainees least able to self-advocate are therefore most at risk of injury and injustice.

Proper training could mitigate these outcomes. Yet neurodiversity awareness remains absent from standard police education, leaving officers unprepared to interpret or de-escalate neurodivergent behaviour. The Panorama footage’s laughter at “red mist” use-of-force episodes demonstrates how empathy has been replaced by performance—*the very opposite of safeguarding*.

4 Mental Health in the Force: A Broken Support System

The **National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC)** and **Home Office** recognise policing as one of the UK's most psychologically hazardous professions. Officers face chronic exposure to trauma, erratic shift patterns, and public hostility. In 2023, the Government introduced the [Right Care, Right Person \(RCRP\) Agreement](#) between the Home Office, NHS England and the College of Policing, designed to ensure that mental-health crises are handled by medical professionals rather than police.

While RCRP aims to protect the public, it does not address the **internal crisis** of police wellbeing. Surveys by staff associations reveal high rates of PTSD, burnout and suicide, yet many officers fear disclosure will harm promotion prospects. The **stigma of mental illness**—and by extension neurodiversity—remains pervasive. The Panorama recordings illustrate this: officers joked about trauma, hid misconduct “off-camera,” and bragged of sexual exploits. Such behaviour functions as collective denial, a coping mechanism that ultimately destroys morale and empathy alike.

5 Leadership, Accountability and Institutional Blindness

Following Panorama's broadcast, Commissioner Rowley claimed the Met had “dismantled the custody team” and that over 1,400 officers and staff had been dismissed since 2022 for failing to meet standards—the “biggest clear-out in the force's history” (BBC News, 2025). Yet critics such as former Attorney General **Dominic Grieve** argued that “high standards, values and discipline didn't seem to be present or being inculcated by the people who were in authority.” The issue, he said, is not isolated misconduct but the **absence of ethical leadership**.

The **Casey Review (2023)** drew the same conclusion: the Met's leadership habitually treats scandals as “bad apples” rather than symptoms of a “rotten barrel.” **Panorama proved that even after years of reform pledges, the mask of respectability hides a subculture that still thrives**. Until the institution accepts collective responsibility—and integrates psychological literacy into leadership training—misconduct will recur.

6 Rebuilding Policing Through Neuro-Inclusion and Psychological Literacy

Real reform must move beyond disciplinary purges to cultural redesign. Key actions include:

1. **Neurodiversity-inclusive recruitment** – introduce voluntary screening, reasonable adjustments and the removal of blanket exclusions for ADHD and autism (Hansard 10 Jun 2025).
2. **Condition-specific workplace guidance** – structured routines, sensory-adapted environments and mentorship for neurodivergent officers.
3. **Mandatory neurodiversity and trauma-informed training** – particularly for custody sergeants and front-line staff dealing with vulnerable detainees.
4. **Psychological supervision** – embed clinical psychologists in high-stress units (custody, firearms, child protection).
5. **Whistle-blower protection** – guarantee that reporting misconduct or declaring disability will not damage careers.
6. **Transparent data** – publish annual force-level statistics on neurodiversity, mental-health absences and disciplinary trends.
7. **Integrated RCRP reviews** – jointly assess serious incidents involving mental-health or neurodivergent detainees to ensure accountability across agencies.

These measures require resources but, above all, cultural humility: an acceptance that compassion and cognitive diversity are operational strengths, not threats to discipline.

Conclusion

The *BBC Panorama* investigation did not expose a few “bad cops”; it revealed a **systemic psychological failure**. When officers feel free to boast of brutality and misogyny, when neurodivergent colleagues hide their conditions, and when leadership denies institutional bias, policing’s moral authority collapses.

At the same time, the **Hansard debates of June and July 2025** show that neurodiversity is still misunderstood and, in some cases, actively excluded from service. This neglect mirrors the same blindness that fuels prejudice and burnout. The **Casey Review**, the **Panorama findings**, and the **RCRP partnership** all point to one conclusion: policing’s crisis is not merely ethical or managerial—it is **psychological and cultural**.

To restore legitimacy, the Met and other UK forces must commit to **neuro-inclusive, trauma-informed, emotionally intelligent policing**. That means dismantling the mask, confronting prejudice, supporting difference, and leading with empathy. Only then can policing reclaim the trust of the neurodiverse, the vulnerable, and the public it is sworn to protect.

Key Sources (all cited above):

- *BBC Panorama: Undercover in the Police*, 1 Oct 2025 — <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m002k7k6>
- *BBC News* article by Adrian Polglase & Joseph Lee (1 Oct 2025): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-69040941>
- *Hansard*, House of Commons 10 June 2025 — [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Debate](#)
- *Hansard*, House of Commons 1 July 2025 — [ADHD Impact on Prison Rehabilitation and Reoffending](#)
- *The Casey Review: An Independent Review into the Standards of Behaviour and Internal Culture of the Metropolitan Police Service*, Mar 2023 — <https://www.met.police.uk/police-forces/metropolitan-police/areas/about-us/about-the-met/casey-review/>
- *Right Care, Right Person Agreement* (Home Office, 2023) — <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/agreement-to-support-mental-health-care-and-free-up-police-time>
- *Equality Act 2010* — <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

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