

Kenyan journalists covering life-threatening events at increased risk of psychological harm

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The first major study of the emotional well-being of journalists covering violent events in an African country replicates findings from Western media, namely that journalists who report on life-threatening events are at increased risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. Two major Kenyan news organisations took part in the research, published today by *JRSM Open*, which focused on two traumatic events, the 2007 election violence that left 1,000 Kenyans dead and the attack on the Westgate Mall in 2013 when Al-Shabab insurgents killed 67 Kenyans. The research found that psychological counselling was offered to less than a quarter of journalists reporting conflict in Kenya.

Dr Anthony Feinstein, who led the research team, said: "Psychological data obtained over the last 10 years from [journalists](#) working in European, American or Middle Eastern theatres of conflict demonstrates that the prevalence rate for post-traumatic stress disorder approaches that seen in combat veterans. This study addresses the dearth of data for conflicts in Africa which is important given the fact that of the continent's 53 countries, half are either currently at war or have only recently seen the end of armed conflict."

The main features of the research were that two thirds of journalists had been offered bribes or told to drop a story, one in five had been injured in their line of work and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder were present to a 'moderate' degree in those who had covered the

election violence, particularly in those who had been wounded doing so.

Dr. Feinstein, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto, said: "A notable finding was the markedly different psychological responses from journalists to their coverage of the election violence and the Westgate Mall attack. The primary reason for this is likely to have been their proximity to danger." The majority of journalists who reported on the Westgate massacre were not directly exposed to danger. By contrast journalists experienced the post-election violence at first hand as neighbour turned on neighbour, communities were destroyed and the media in some cases became the focus of mob rage. Here, said Dr Feinstein, the risks were life threatening, the dangers underscored by the number of journalists injured. "The deeply traumatic nature of this exposure to violence is highlighted by the fact that seven years on from the rioting and mayhem, prominent symptoms of [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) and anxiety remain."

Dr Feinstein concluded: "We hope that this study will encourage news organisations in Kenya and other African countries that send journalists into harm's way to look out for their psychological health and offer confidential counselling as a matter of course."

More information: The psychological effects of reporting extreme violence: a study of Kenyan journalists ([DOI: 10.1177/2054270415602828](https://doi.org/10.1177/2054270415602828)) by Anthony Feinstein, Justus Wanga and John Owen will be published by the *JRSM Open* on Friday 25 September 2015.

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