

Psychological damage among officers heightened by bad working conditions

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High levels of trauma-related mental health disorders across UK police forces are partly the result of bad working conditions such as having too little time, sexual harassment, and dealing with difficult situations

without support, according to a study led by the University of Cambridge.

However, officers who say they feel supported by colleagues, and have a sense of doing meaningful work, had around half the rates of a form of PTSD as the national average for policing staff.

Researchers behind the study say their findings suggest that simple improvements to the working lives of [police](#)—scheduled time for support from peers and supervisors, for example—could dramatically reduce the level of psychiatric problems in UK forces.

Sociologists surveyed thousands of police personnel across the country in 2018 and found that 12% showed clinical symptoms of Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), a chronic condition in which repeated trauma exposure causes social disconnection, feelings of worthlessness, and an inability to regulate emotions.

Complex PTSD often leads to "burnout" and substance abuse. In fact, 90% of police workers in the original survey study 'The Job, The Life' had experienced trauma, and one in five of these reported symptoms of either PTSD or C-PTSD.

Now, the same team of researchers have analysed [survey data](#) provided by 12,248 serving [police officers](#) to determine the working conditions and on-the-job situations with the strongest links to Complex PTSD. The latest findings are published in the journal *Policing*.

Trauma detailed by officers with probable levels of Complex PTSD based on the survey screening included dealing with fatal car accidents, rapes, homicides, suicides—including of children—and drug overdoses.

Exposure to physical violence made little difference to rates of C-PTSD,

nor did long working hours.

However, officers who described it as "very difficult" to take time away from the job for personal or family matters had C-PTSD rates over 50% higher than the UK-wide average for police.

Those who described their relationship between work and personal life as "not fitting well at all", some 15% of police officers in the study, had twice (24%) the average policing rates of C-PTSD.

One officer suffering with probable C-PTSD described how what you see "impacts on your life outside of work", offering the example of cases involving dead children that "make you anxious about your own children's wellbeing. To a degree you lose your innocence."

Another C-PTSD sufferer said "it is a given and accepted" that the job means exposure to trauma, and describes the occupational health team in their force as "brilliant" but few in number. "They are only able to put 'sticky plasters' on, and send the officers back out," the officer said.

Police officers who described never having enough time to "get the job done" had almost double the rates of C-PTSD as the average across UK forces, 22% compared to 12%, as did officers who reported experiencing [sexual harassment](#)—whether from the public or colleagues*.

Officers who said they could never rely on the help and support of colleagues were most likely to suffer with Complex PTSD, with over 43% displaying symptoms, but such claims were relatively rare.

One detective with C-PTSD symptoms recounted dealing with sexual abuse cases as the sole investigating officer. "Little or no support from management. Victims hanging all their hopes and pressures on me."

By contrast, C-PTSD rates were just 7% among those who said they could always rely on colleagues, and just 6% among those who say they regularly get a feeling of a job well done, with researchers claiming that a sense of meaningful work may provide a "protective effect" mentally.

"Our research shows that the debilitating psychological misery often caused by trauma exposure isn't an inevitable part of the difficult job of policing, it is exacerbated by poor working conditions," said Prof Brendan Burchell, lead author from Cambridge's Department of Sociology.

The team also conducted analyses beyond individual officers to compare forces, revealing a strong link between "work intensity"—those forces with more officers reporting a lack of time to effectively police—and increased rates of Complex PTSD.

Of 18 anonymised UK police forces, the one with the highest reported time constraints among officers had C-PTSD rates of 29%, well over double the average for the overall policing population.

"Severe austerity cuts since 2010 leading to a marked reduction in police numbers without a decrease in the demands of the job inevitably creates more time pressure for remaining officers," said Burchell.

"Single-crewing, shift work and fewer resources mean that time for encouraging words between colleagues or space for officers to acknowledge their traumatic experiences are few and far between."

One officer with probable C-PTSD described being "single crewed" at a rural location for a year, with nearest support almost an hour away. Another spoke of going from a shift team of five to working alone. "My coping strategy of being around colleagues who had been to the same fatal accident or suicide was taken away from me."

Cambridge co-author Dr. Jessica Miller, who is also director of research for Police Care UK, the charity that funded the research, added: "The police forces reporting the best working conditions had much lower rates of PTSD. Modest investments to improve their working conditions could see significant reductions in psychological problems among police officers."

More information: Brendan Burchell et al, The association between job quality and the incidence of PTSD amongst police personnel, *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* (2022). DOI: [10.1093/police/paac054](https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paac054)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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