

# Research reveals harrowing impact of traumatic material on crime investigators

May 25 2023, by Fazeelat Duran

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According to recent by the University of Birmingham, 37% of analytical practitioners have been diagnosed with severe depression, while approximately 55% of them suffer from moderate depression. Credit: University of Birmingham/Author, Author provided

Rape, murders, torture, arson, acts of terrorism and even genocide: if there is one thing police and justice staff know, it is that humanity's cruelty and destruction knows few bounds. In their jobs, the professionals working to bring offenders to justice are routinely exposed to traumatic experiences through written witness accounts, video footage

or recordings. And there is [increasing concern](#) that the systems in place are failing to protect them.

In Europe, the figures are alarming. In 2022, mental health issues led [police officers](#) in England to take [730,000 days of sick leave](#)—up from 320,000 in 2012/13. In Spain, [28 committed suicide](#)—21.4% less than in 2021, but the second worst figure since records began.

This climbs to [78 suicides](#) in France when including prison guards, while Greece [recorded 159 suicides](#) among [police forces](#) in 2019. The situation is compounded by the stigmatization of opening up about [mental health issues](#), where officers fear that it could lead them to be seen as weak or deny them the chances of career progression.

To better grasp how traumatic material affects police forces, our team of psychologists at the University of Birmingham conducted [surveys and 40 interviews with analytical practitioners in the UK, Belgium, Spain, Netherlands and Canada](#). This group of professionals work in the shadows of crime investigations. They include crime analysts, intelligence analysts, intelligence officers, digital forensic analysts and behavioral investigative advisors. An integral part of the criminal justice system, they provide analysis, intelligence and support to investigations and prosecutions for the most serious of crimes. Among them, 37% were diagnosed with [severe depression](#) and approximately 55% with moderate depression, as per our analysis conducted early this year.

## **Echoes of trauma**

Analytical practitioners have reported how this constant exposure negatively influences their feelings about the world, their home life and social life. Reflecting a general concern among these professionals over their loved ones' safety, one woman said,

"I am more worried about my sister is she would tell her [she were] going for a walk in the night on a quiet road."

Interviewees report precautionary and avoidance behavior related to the trauma they have read or heard about via their work. This affects their lives and the lives of close family. One of them, S. (all interviewees are anonymous) wonders how can he "leave his children at someone's place for sleepover". His voice noticeably shaking, he says that he "thinks he is more skeptical than a normal parent would be". Meanwhile, Y. says she doesn't leave a phone charger on her bedside, as she "thinks the burglar would strangle her with that".

Interviewees grappled with intense emotions, mentioning instances of "emotional meltdown". "The victim's interviews are distressing to watch," Z. said, her eyes searching around her nervously. "They are written in such detail that I often feel tears rolling down my cheeks."

Overall, many report having "forgotten how to trust". "I'm more socially aware of my surroundings," one man says. "I'd say I'm more cautious, and I don't make friends as easily". "It's turned me into a paranoid wreck in relationships," another woman admits "Like if I dated a man, he'd behave like one of those offenders whose cases I've worked on".

We found that analytical practitioners with a belief that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people (known as "belief in a just world") are at greater risk of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is possible experience bad things happening to good people and that bad deeds go unpunished, leading to psychological distress.

## **Ignored by governments**

Despite the toll this exposure takes, our interviewees felt invisible to

policy-makers, commenting that little consideration was given to their mental health and well-being compared to that given to front-line officers. One woman expressed relief the focus was finally turned toward them.

Most analytical practitioners who spoke to us said they had received no training on what are adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms to manage working with traumatic content. They felt the support provided to them was reactive not preventative, and mental health stigmatization in the workplace was certainly a barrier to help-seeking for some.

"Seeking private support is my only option. All will know what problems I am facing and some will think I cannot do my job or I'm unfit for the job."

For these professionals to protect us, we need to protect them. On top of our academic research, we produced [two videos](#) to give them a voice and raise awareness of the impact of this work on their [mental health](#).

We are also co-producing a tool kit with practical recommendations for organizations and we are working with the lead of Strand 3 of the National Well-being Group for UK policing that focuses on the well-being of investigators. The aim of our work is to give them a voice and recognition.

Looking forward, more research is required to understand the mechanisms for what could be the risk and resilience factors for these analytical practitioners and other professionals experiencing difficulties working indirectly with traumatic experiences of other people. This will help employers and [policy-makers](#) provide adequate support.

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