

Post Office Scandal victims in UK suffering from significant PTSD and depression, study shows

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"Alarmingly high" numbers of Post Office Scandal victims in the U.K. suffer depression and PTSD symptoms, a new study shows.

Those accused of problems caused by the Horizon IT failures have severe psychological and social harms. This is true whether they were convicted or whether they have received [financial compensation](#), researchers have found.

The study is the first to measure the mental health of individuals involved in the scandal. It is published in the journal *Legal and Criminological Psychology*.

Researchers surveyed 101 victims who were wrongly accused, convicted and/or investigated for financial "losses" that were actually caused by software errors. Most reported clinically significant post-traumatic stress (67%) and depressive (60%) symptoms—irrespective of the outcome of their case.

[The study](#) was carried out by Bethany Gowns from the University of Canterbury, Christchurch; Jeff Kukucka from Towson University; and Richard Moorhead and Rebecca Helm from the University of Exeter Law School.

Professor Moorhead, who leads a project on the [scandal](#), said, "Our findings have important implications for victims of the Post Office Scandal and highlight the unique needs of people impacted by flawed convictions and flawed legal accusations. The research underscores the need to provide exonerees with support and demonstrate that this support should also be extended to victims of wrongful accusation."

Prevalence of clinically significant PTSD and/or [depressive symptoms](#) was much higher than those seen in the general UK population and higher even than those seen in other vulnerable populations—including UK Armed Forces personnel and UK frontline health workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Professor Helm said, "Victims of the Post Office Scandal are experiencing poor mental health at worryingly high levels. This highlights the need to put in place mental health support for all those accused, regardless of conviction, as well as to complete the process of settling financial compensation cases.

"We found no differences in the severity of mental health symptoms between respondents who were convicted of criminal offenses and respondents who were investigated, prosecuted and/or pursued in [civil court](#). These findings provide the first evidence that wrongful accusation may be just as damaging to mental health as wrongful conviction."

Professor Moorhead said, "Our data highlight the importance of reliable investigation practices within the criminal justice system. Our results suggest that an erroneous accusation or investigation is not without consequence for the accused, even if it does not result in a wrongful conviction or civil liability. This underscores the need to ensure that all civil and criminal investigations are conducted responsibly and professionally using evidence-based techniques from commencement."

Participants were sub-postmasters recruited via e-mails sent to organizations supporting victims of the Scandal and a law firm representing many victims as clients, as well as subsequent snowball sampling through those individuals. After the survey, each participant received their choice of either a £25 Amazon voucher or a £25 donation to the Horizon Scandal Fund on their behalf.

Participants completed the PCL-5 [survey](#), which measures trauma exposure and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Most exceeded the recommended cutoff scores for clinically significant post-traumatic stress symptoms and clinically significant depressive symptoms. Most participants also met clinically significant cutoffs for PTSD Criteria B (82.47%), C (81.63%), D (80.61%) and E (73.47%; with 63.37%

meeting all four criteria and thus showing a profile consistent with PTSD.

More information: Bethany Grown et al, The Post Office Scandal in the United Kingdom: Mental health and social experiences of wrongly convicted and wrongly accused individuals, *Legal and Criminological Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/lcrp.12247](https://doi.org/10.1111/lcrp.12247)

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