

Violence against the police – an exploration of how officers navigate the challenges posed by violence

Understanding how violence challenges individual police officers and how they navigate and respond to these challenges.

Key details

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Police region	North East
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Research context

This research project has two broad aims. First, the hope is to identify and explore the ways in which violence challenges individual police officers. ‘Challenges’ are not defined here and may they take the form of physical, mental, emotional, ethical and practical considerations.

Second, the intention is also to gain an understanding of how officers navigate and respond to such challenges. To this end, the following two principal research questions have been posed.

1. In what ways does violence, as well as the threat of facing violence, challenge individual police officers?
2. Through what tools, methods and approaches do officers navigate the various challenges posed by violence?

The hope is that the insight provided by officers may assist future policy decisions – perhaps in relation to training or the use of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Facing the threat of violence has always been an intrinsic aspect of British policing. Unfortunately, recent data suggests it is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon (Home Office, 2019). The Health and Safety Executive (2017) found that between 2015 and 2016, police officers were part of an employment group where the risk of assault in the workplace was eight times greater than the average. In the financial year of 2018/19, more than 30,000 assaults were recorded on the police officers of England and Wales – 10,399 of which resulted in injury (Home Office, 2019).

Violent encounters between officers and the public can also impact on the wider community (Bierie, 2015; Barrick, Hickman and Strom, 2014; Fridell and others, 2009; Bayley and Garofalo, 1989; Peterson and Bailey 1988).

Across the globe, the police continue to have troubled relationships with many Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities (Paoline, Gau and Terrill, 2017). As highlighted by the death of George Floyd, when police action leads to the loss of life, the repercussions can be explosive and far-reaching. In an era of camera equipped mobile phones and social media, violent scenes can spread rapidly. Viewpoints solidify in seconds, sometimes before the incidents themselves have concluded. The legalities around the actions of those involved are often irrelevant (Bierie, 2015).

However, violence is complex, multifaceted and influenced by numerous contextual and situational factors. As far back as forty years ago, Sherman (1980) suggested that in order to ‘understand the whole of police and violence, we need first understand its component parts’.

In short, to better comprehend violent encounters between the police and the public we also need to explore the violence directed towards police officers.

This research also takes place against the backdrop of an increased focus on officer wellbeing. Policing in the UK is a highly stressful profession (Houdmont, Kerr and Randall, 2012; Collins and

Gibbs, 2003). Collins & Gibbs (2003) found that 41% of British police officers might be classed as suffering from mental health issues.

Obst and others (2001) found that 48% of male and 40% of female police officers in the UK had a problematic relationship with alcohol. Police officers also tend to have above average mortality rates from a number of degenerative diseases (Stinchcomb, 2004). The causes of such ill-health are multi-faceted and involve both 'operational' and 'organisational' stressors.

The challenge for this research project is to understand the role of violence as a threat to the health and wellbeing of officers. In a survey of British police officers Collins and Gibbs (2003) found the top five operational stressors were all associated with violence. Working from the most to least prevalent, these include:

- dealing with someone who is drunk
- verbal aggression from the public
- having to use force to restrain
- physical aggression from the public
- answering officer calls for assistance

This research has the potential to dovetail with wider developments. In 2017, partly due to some of the problems outlined above, the National Police Wellbeing Service (NPWS) was launched under the brand name Oscar Kilo (NPWS, 2020). The establishment of such a service reflects a greater focus on officer wellbeing.

In 2018, new legislation was created in the form of the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill which increases sentences for those who assault police officers (Dearden, 2018). Furthermore, across Britain the police are increasingly being asked to do more with less in the way of resources (Engel and Henderson, 2014). Indeed, austerity reduced some police budgets by around 25% (Higgins and Hales, 2016).

The Boris Johnson government has promised to increase officer numbers but this will likely create challenges in attracting and then retaining applicants. What role does violence play in decisions to leave the police altogether? In short, this research project is well placed to explore the nexus between a range of contemporary policing issues and the violence endured by police officers. The planned interviews may also capture some of the impact of COVID-19 on policing, particularly where the virus has been 'weaponised' against police officers.

Research methodology

Under the approach of constructivist grounded theory, 30 semi-structured interviews will be used to build an understanding of how officers respond to the challenges posed by violence. This approach has seldom been taken and there are very few examples of qualitative studies in this area.

In addition, interviews will also take place with representatives from the Police Federation. It is hoped that this will provide a further perspective in respect to how officers respond to the threat of violence within their work.

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