

A prospective longitudinal study of the impact of exposure to traumatic material on wellbeing and its causal mechanisms in 'back office' police and law

This study will look at the impact that regular exposure to traumatic material has on policing staff and to explore why some individuals demonstrate greater resilience than others.

Key details

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Police region	West Midlands
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	September 2020
Date due for completion	October 2023

Research context

It is well-recognised that first responders can suffer from exposure to traumatic material (TM) and, indeed, this is the focus of other research groups (for example, Donders Institute and Radboud University Nijmegen, Oscar Kilo & the Police Dependant Trust) and research papers (for example, Craun and others, 2014; Wortley and others, 2014).

However, numerous professionals in analytical and secondary investigative roles (for example, crime and intelligence analysts, digital forensics analysts, covert human intelligence staff, translators and researchers) are also exposed to TM.

Although these professionals may be exposed in greater depth and frequency to TM than some front-line staff, there is a very limited understanding of the causal mechanisms through which exposure to TM can negatively impact wellbeing and conversely what the mechanisms are for resilience. These need to be properly understood to intervene effectively.

Our study is investigating several potential mechanisms. Our long-term objectives are to not only advance our understanding of the TM that back-office staff are exposed to and how they cope with this, but through the triangulation of different research methods and through a prospective, longitudinal design we will answer fundamental questions about how exposure to traumatic material can have its deleterious effects and why some individuals show greater resilience than others.

Research methodology

The focus of this research will be on two inter-related strands, namely a longitudinal and a cross-sectional study.

1. Prospective longitudinal study

Forty analysts will be the participants in a unique prospective, longitudinal study. Twenty of these analysts are exposed on a daily basis, in detail, to material depicting sexual violence and murder. These are referred to as the TM-exposed group and are being recruited from the National Crime Agency. The remaining twenty analysts represent a comparison group and work in a policing environment but not on violent or sexually-violent material (for example, non-violent crime or strategic analysts).

Both TM-exposed and control groups will be invited to take part in three components that make up the longitudinal study: a questionnaire battery, an interview, and behavioural tasks/experiments at the University of Birmingham. Data will be collected via questionnaire/interview at baseline and at three other timepoints (6, 12, 18 months).

2. Cross-sectional mapping of back-office staff

The cross-sectional element is an international survey of approximately 200 participants, all of whom are in a back-office role in the Police, law enforcement or in a justice setting (for example, the International Criminal Courts).

They will be in the following roles:

- intelligence analysts
- sexual violence crime analysts
- behavioural investigative advisors
- digital forensics analysts
- covert human intelligence staff with regular (if not daily) and in-depth exposure to TM

Each participant will complete:

1. A battery of psychometric tests to measure different aspects of psychological distress or wellbeing (secondary traumatic stress, compassion satisfaction, burnout and compassion fatigue, depression, anxiety, sleep problems) using the online survey.
2. A 45-minute, one-to-one semi-structured interview with Dr Duran including questions regarding the nature of the participant's work, probing for relevant mechanisms that might affect the impact of TM on the individual (for example, use of imagery while working), the impact of the work on them and how they and their employer manage its impact (for example, memory suppression, emotional distancing, peer support), if at all.

Interim reports or publications

Duran, F., & Woodhams, J. (2022). [Impact of the current pandemic on intelligence and analytical professionals working in police and law enforcement organizations](#). Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy. Advance online publication.

Duran, F., Woodhams, J. [Impact of Traumatic Material on Professionals in Analytical and Secondary Investigative Roles Working in Criminal Justice Settings: a Qualitative Approach](#). J Police Crim Psych (2022).