

Understanding the experiences of emergency call handlers in relation to mental health, wellbeing and trauma exposure

Developing an understanding of the experiences of emergency call handlers in relation to their role and trial a workplace intervention to support good mental health.

Key details

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Lead institution | University of Huddersfield |
| Principal researcher(s) | Rebecca Kinnear rebecca.kinnear@hud.ac.uk |
| Police region | Yorkshire |
| Level of research | PhD |
| Project start date | October 2022 |
| Date due for completion | June 2025 |

Research context

Emergency call handlers are the first point of contact for individuals seeking help from the emergency services, providing a critical interface between the public and the police (Garner and Johnson 2006) and playing a crucial role in assessing and initiating the appropriate response from within the emergency services. The call handler role is of utmost importance in ensuring public safety and accurate police responses. In this way, the call handler's role and responsibilities are 'a cornerstone of national capabilities in responding to national threats' (NPCC 2023, p. 11) and their importance cannot be overstated.

It is acknowledged that emergency call handlers are regularly exposed to potentially traumatic and distressing events (Wojciechowska and others 2021) and research has suggested higher rates of

mental health difficulties within call handlers working on the frontline when compared to the general public (Galbraith and others 2021, Lilly and Pierce 2013, Lilly and Allen 2015, Sprigg and others 2007).

While there is a growing body of research in the area of wellbeing in the emergency services – which provides valuable insights into this occupational group – there is a striking lack of literature regarding understanding the experiences of police call handlers in the UK, especially in reference to their mental health and wellbeing.

The aims of this study are to firstly understand the experiences of police emergency call handlers in relation to their mental health, coping strategies and engagement with wellbeing services. Based on this data, the research will then measure the impact of an evidence-based psychological intervention on mental health and resilience.

Research methodology

Phase one

A rapid evidence review was undertaken to understand the current literature in this area and provide a basis for which to develop the subsequent phases of research.

Phase two

A total of twenty-four call handlers from three distinctly different police forces volunteered to take part in the research interviews between August and October 2023, designed to gather data to support the aim of understanding the experience of emergency police call-handlers.

The interviews lasted 30–60 minutes and were all conducted using a remote video platform. The interviews were undertaken on a one-to-one basis with each participant and the researcher using a semi-structured format. Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen as the method to analyse the qualitative interviews conducted (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Additionally, the Connor-Davidson resilience scale (CD-RISC) (Connor and Davidson 2003) was used to understand the participants' self-reported resilience levels.

Phase three

This phase involves trialling psychological, evidence-based interventions designed to promote positive mental health and resilience with participants to establish whether there is any change in CD-RISC scores pre- and post-intervention, and qualitative, subjective self-reports of wellbeing and resilience.

Research participation

Recruitment for the intervention phase will run until September 2024.

References

- Braun V and Clarke V. 2006. 'Using thematic analysis in psychology'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp 77–101.
- Connor KM and Davidson JR. 2003. 'Development of a new resilience scale: The Connor-Davidson resilience scale (CD-RISC)'. *Depression and Anxiety*, 18(2), pp 76–82.
- Galbraith N and others. 2021. 'Patterns of occupational stress in police contact and dispatch personnel: implications for physical and psychological health'. *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health*, 94, pp 231–241.
- Garner M and Johnson E. 2006. 'Operational communication: a paradigm for applied research into police call-handling.' *International Journal of Speech Language and the Law*, 13(1), p. 55.
- Lilly MM and Pierce H. 2013. 'PTSD and depressive symptoms in 911 telecommunicators: The role of peritraumatic distress and world assumptions in predicting risk'. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*, 5(2), p. 135.
- Lilly MM and Allen CE. 2015. 'Psychological inflexibility and psychopathology in 9-1-1 telecommunicators'. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 28(3), pp 262-266.
- National Police Chief's Council (NPCC). 2023. '[National contact management strategic plan 2023–2028](#)'. [internet]
- Sprigg CA and others. 2007. 'Verbal abuse in the National Health Service: impressions of the prevalence, perceived reasons for and relationships with staff psychological well-being'. *Emergency Medicine Journal*, 24(4), pp 281–282.

Wojciechowska M and others. 2021. 'Mediating role of stress at work in the relationship of alexithymia and PTSD among emergency call operators'. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18(23), p. 12830.

Tags

- [Wellbeing](#)