

The over-representation of poor mental health within policing: A critical realist approach

This research project has interviewed 86 police officers (70 from within a single force, and 16 from other forces) to examine the cause of poor mental health in police officers.

Key details

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Police region	Wales
Level of research	PhD
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Research context

Mind's (2015) The Blue Light Scoping Survey identified that 91% of police personnel in England reported experiencing low mood, stress and poor mental health. This was considered the highest level among all the emergency services. To examine this overrepresentation of cognitive suffering, this case study draws on 86 unstructured narrative interviews conducted with retired and serving constables of all ranks. Each had worked or was currently serving for Sandford Police, an anonymous constabulary situated in England and Wales. Using Layder's (1998) Adaptive Theory, the case study modifies two propositions to propose the core argument of the thesis: specifically, what primarily affects participants' mental health is not the traumatic operational incidents that constables witness, but the harmful chronic organisational relations that affect police officers' sense of inner security.

The thesis identifies four themes of potential mental injury:

- organisational control
- being internally investigated
- institutional masculinity
- stress arising from disconnecting and being disconnected from the job

This challenges the dominant framing of mental ill-health as a problem of individual cognition, arguing instead that cognitive suffering arises out of the harmful organisational relations that constables must inhabit and negotiate. As such, the thesis argues that the institutional structures and cultures of policing ought to be the principal focus of further research into the overrepresentation of poor mental health among police officers of all ranks.

Research methodology

This research design used unstructured narrative interviewing to circumvent police officers' defended subjectivity to elicit a narrative arc of their life histories and policing careers. A causal abstraction was conducted to identify the necessary relations of police officers' mental health. This identified the importance of ontological security and the three primary relations of wellbeing, eudemonic purpose, hedonic pleasure and sense of flow. The dominance of medical psychiatry was problematised because it provides an objective diagnosis based on subjective opinion. Therefore, participants were asked to discuss what made them feel good and bad about their lives and policing careers. The 86 interviews were then axially coded and transformed into four themes, with the aim of including and examining relations beyond the empirical to include mechanisms within the real.