

New research reveals the true impact of COVID-19 on police wellbeing

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The true impact on the wellbeing of frontline officers policing the pandemic has been revealed by new research from the University of

Portsmouth.

Researchers surveyed 626 serving [police officers](#) of different ranks and roles in Hampshire Constabulary during the summer of 2020, with further interviews conducted with 39 of those officers during the winter of 2020/21. The purpose was to understand the challenges faced by those tasked with enforcing the law during periods of lockdown.

The majority of officers interviewed commended Hampshire Constabulary's welfare support services for staff. Nearly three-quarters of the survey respondents knew where to access organizational support (72.7%) with only 12.1% saying they didn't know how to access these services.

Just over 63% agreed that the force was adapting well to changes in working conditions due to the [pandemic](#), and just over 60% stated that they felt equipped to manage both personal and [work demands](#).

However the reality of policing the pandemic also revealed some stark results. Around 35% of those surveyed said they had been abused or threatened by a member of the public. The topic of personal safety divided the opinion of officers with one in three saying they felt unsafe dealing with the public during lockdowns, although nearly 38% of officers disagreed with this statement.

Front-line officers, unable to work from home, recorded the lowest wellbeing scores. Custody staff, neighborhood [police](#) and response and patrol officers reported an increased burden resulting from workload pressures. These officers bore the brunt of demands to police restrictions at the same time as responding to non-COVID-19 incidents, whilst keeping themselves and the public safe.

Nearly half (47%) reported increased anxiety with a quarter (25%)

saying they had experienced a negative health impact, although just over half said their health had not been affected. Officers expressed concerns about potentially infecting family members with the virus. Others had difficulties providing childcare, particularly with schools in lockdown and childminders or extended family members unable to provide usual levels of support.

The experience of policing the pandemic appears to have left many officers with serious questions about the role of the police. The research shows that they are concerned about how they are perceived by the public, with their newly acquired role in enforcing the restrictions placing them in a 'no win' situation. There was concern that both mainstream and [social media](#) distorted the reality of policing lockdowns, fostering negative public sentiment that left officers demoralized and 'on the back foot.' Hampshire Constabulary's Neighborhood Policing Teams have however used Facebook and Twitter to continue to provide their communities with an insight into their activities during the pandemic.

Despite the pressures the pandemic has placed upon officers, just one in seven reported that the experience had left them more likely to leave the profession, nearly 60% of respondents disagreed with this statement.

About half the officers questioned were able to work from home. They reported some benefits, including improved mental health, greater productivity, a better work-life balance, and increased flexibility to manage childcare. However, the study also shows the experience of home working raises potential downsides to police wellbeing; including perceptions of unfairness, isolation, problems managing workload and separating work from home life.

Dr. Sarah Charman, from the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies at the University of Portsmouth, says: "Perhaps more than any other profession, the police have had to contend with an unenviable list of

thorny COVID-19 related issues. The pandemic has changed both what the police do and how they do it, with potential long-lasting consequences for not only the relationship between the public and the police, but for police officers themselves."

Geoff Newiss, Research Associate from the University of Portsmouth says: "Our research suggests that steps to improve police wellbeing are going to be much needed, yet ensuring they are effective is likely to be far from straight-forward. Some concerns—such as the additional threats to officers' safety—might, hopefully, dissipate with the retreat of the virus. Others—such as home working, the heavy toll on frontline officers and public perceptions—will require careful consideration."

Assistant Chief Constable Maggie Blyth said: "Policing by consent is vital to us at Hampshire Constabulary, as is the trust and confidence of our diverse communities. The additional powers that policing has been given during the pandemic are temporary in line with The Coronavirus Act 2020 and the Health Protection Regulations 2021 and we have continued to focus on crime and reducing harm across Hampshire at the same time.

"The events of the last year have been unprecedented, not just for our communities, but also for our workforce. Wellbeing has been an important topic for policing in recent years with Oscar Kilo (National Police Wellbeing Service) launching in 2017. The pandemic has placed significant pressures upon officers and staff, but the results of this research show that Hampshire Constabulary is successfully delivering support to the officers that need it. We're proud to have a comprehensive wellbeing scheme for our entire workforce. This comprises wide-ranging actions such as offering flu jabs, fitness challenges, improved physiotherapy and psychological screening, trauma support, information and advice about nutrition, sleep and other health matters.

"Our sickness rates (which also includes people isolating due to the test and trace processes) during the pandemic are testament to the ongoing success of this wellbeing program. These rates have not exceeded an average of 3.6% of the total workforce being unable to work at any given time. This means we have had one of the lowest sickness rates for policing in the UK during the pandemic."

Researchers at the University of Portsmouth have been conducting a program of research on the impacts of policing the pandemic (funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19). The survey is one strand of this work which looks at how changes in policing have affected police officers' wellbeing.

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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