

ANALYSIS:

## Suspicious minds: Police attitudes to mental ill health

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 1 Comments



As the new National Police Wellbeing Service is launched this week in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Nikola Muranova, a Policing student and Lecturer Nick Kealey from the Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing Studies at Liverpool John Moores University review recent research into police officers attitudes towards mental health.

The following is a review of [Suspicious minds: Police Attitudes to Mental Ill Health](#) which was written by Sean Bell and Sue Palmer-Conn and researches officers' attitudes to mental health.

Over the last eight years, the police service in England & Wales has lost in the region of 44,000 officers and staff (Home Office, 2018). This, together with a surge in demand around knife crime, violence and anti-social behaviour provides a significant challenge to the first responder and others in the policing family. Whilst officers and staff struggle to meet demand, there are clear indications that the challenge of matching reasonable public expectation to resources is having an adverse psychological effect on those tasked with protecting the public. The article suggests there has been a lack of research into police attitudes to mental ill health and the effect on police officers and police staff, and looks to redress the balance.

The co-authors are Sean Bell, a retired Police Inspector with experience as a Police Federation Representative and current Lecturer and PhD student at Liverpool John Moores University, and Sue Palmer-Conn who is the vice chair of the British Psychological Society for Psychology in Education and a Lecturer at LJMU. Their research measured police attitudes to mental health and uniquely benchmarked them against those of the public they serve, as measured by the Time to Change Survey (2015) to provide an objective assessment of police understanding of mental ill health. The attitudes of 1000 plus police officers and staff from the majority of forces across England and Wales were examined, as the authors sought to establish what are police attitudes to mental ill health?

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Interestingly, their research identified the similarity of police mental health attitudes to the general public. The police family were generally more positive and knowledgeable in their views, with police staff achieving the highest score. This is consistent with the previous findings of Cotton (2004) and Clayfield *et al* (2011) but is inconsistent with Soomro & Yanos (2018) who assert that police officers experience higher rates of trauma and PTSD than the general population, although in fairness, their sample size was limited. Nonetheless, it is necessary to mention that police officers are not keen to talk about their own mental health. This may be because officers are unhappy to link their welfare to others with a mental illness who may present a danger to the society (Cummins, 2012).

Intriguingly, the results indicate the existence of an inherent stigma in the police when it comes to reporting concerns around their own mental health. Sadly, only 27% of police officers would speak to their colleagues about mental health problems and just 34% would consider informing their manager. Furthermore, the study revealed links to “cop culture” in a sense that officers do not aspire to be seen as weak and worry about their job security (Loftus, 2010; Karaffa & Tochkov, 2013). Three-quarters of police officers and more than half of police staff were negative about disclosing a mental health problem due to the possible consequences this may have on their future career.

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“Won't tell, can't tell”

Similarities arose between external public facing and internal organisational attitudes to the authenticity of mental ill health. Officers perceived there is a difficulty in correctly identifying mental illness and were often suspicious of the veracity of those with mental ill health they encountered. Likewise, the article suggests that a majority of officers/staff doubt the authenticity of stress related absences and colleagues could be viewed as malingers. This was consistent with the results of recent studies (Stuart, 2017; Turner & Jenkins, 2018). Until such attitudes are addressed, this will be to the detriment of police personnel and the communities they serve.

The article provides an insight into the mystery of mental health within the police service despite the fact that it revealed contrasting findings. For the first time, police officers and staff provide evidence that they are generally supportive of those they encounter with a mental illness and are open-minded when it comes to equality and employment. That said, they remain suspicious of the effectiveness of community based interventions. On the other hand, the study reveals that

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the effectiveness of community-based interventions. On the other hand, the study reveals that policing practice is associated with a healthy dose of scepticism. It is clear that police officers are unwilling to reveal concerns around their own mental health, either in a professional, medical or family setting. Sadly, the study links this to a “won’t tell, can’t tell” culture and a lack of transparency or understanding within the forces. It appears that police officers, staff and managers feel unprepared to cope with stressful and traumatic events linked to their own experiences, rather than those associated with those they serve. The stigma of policing with mental illness should be addressed more consistently.

Some may argue that this underlying cynicism (or pessimism) directed towards mental ill health in the policing sector, is a consequence of the austerity cuts and the subsequent difficulties police have to cope with when balancing resources against demand. Certainly, it would be a great shame to ignore those who are protective of their role for the public and adopt a liberal stance towards mental health.

“ It remains the personal or professional judgement of the individual to speak out/seek help about work-related concerns around mental health

It remains the personal or professional judgement of the individual to speak out/seek help about work-related concerns around mental health, and the effects it may have in their chosen career. Undoubtedly, the effects of mental health must not be underestimated, particularly as police personnel had the highest personal experience of mental health problem across all of the emergency services (PFEW, 2016).

A sobering thought and one to consider for even the most suspicious mind.

*Nikola Muranova is an ambitious European student undertaking a Policing Studies and Forensic Psychology (BSc) degree at LJMU. Following in her father's footsteps, Nikola is keen to pursue a career in policing, and hopes to link her studies and knowledge of psychology as a Crime Analyst.*

*Nick Kealey is a lecturer in Policing Studies at LJMU. He is an experienced former Merseyside Police Sergeant who worked as part of multi-agency team to identify and improve the support available to those with mental ill-health in the Criminal Justice System as offender, victim or witness.*

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## One Response to “Suspicious minds: Police attitudes to mental ill health”



**A Boland** says:

[29th May 2019 at 8:26 am](#) [\(Edit\)](#)

Thanks to the Authors for this article. I am a police officer in Ireland working in front line policing for over 20yrs. I have studied in the area after becoming ill from the impact of work and suffering from ptsd. Reading studies globally I have come to realise that we underestimate the impact policing has on our mental health and our relationships with others including families. Officers working in front line policing are impacted by their job mentally. This has to be a given. Most officers don't even realise and rely on negative uppers to counterbalance this negative impact eg. drinking, smoking, gambling, eating the wrong foods, extramarital affairs. While others partake in positive, sports or studying to name two. In my experience some officers that don't feel their work is appreciated and can become less and less engaged in their work. Performance and discipline become issues. Others continue to engage and perform becoming more and more impacted. Because there is no education in relation to mental health, police officers are all ready in it unknown to themselves. Globally there is a high rate of suicide among the policing fraternity which never should be the case considering we all had to do physicals and medicals initially.

When I became unwell I did feel this emotional labour I undertook was unappreciated by my superiors but I changed focus. Senior officers are there to manage resources and put strategies in place to consider all the stakeholders and rely on data analyses strategies to police, this is their function. Not all police officers want or look for promotion but need their role acknowledged.

Policing on the ground has not changed. The most innocent and vulnerable in our society do appreciate this work and emotional labour and every opportunity to drive this home to officers needs to be taken. Talking openly about mental health issues is a strength not a weakness, it is the elephant in the room after all. We all deserve to



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complete our service feeling we have worked well for the greater good and deserve a healthy and happy retirement. Be safe.

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