

OPINION:

Sausages and storytelling: The benefits of police canteen culture

6th August 2021
 Nick Kealey, Lecturer, Liverpool John Moores University      5
 12 Comments



Police canteens have largely disappeared from the police estate, and with them the opportunity to socialise, offer emotional support, and share hopes and fears; Liverpool John Moores University Lecturer Nick Kealey, and Open University Lecturer Dr Sean Bell – both former Merseyside Police officers – argue that reinstating police canteen or night-kitchen facilities could be an important step in improving mental health support and reducing stigma.

Wellbeing initiatives such as the [Mind Blue Light Programme](#), the Police Federation's [Hear 'Man Up' – Think 'Man Down'](#), and more recently the [College of Policing Wellbeing Programme](#) seek to increase the conversation about mental ill-health and reduce the stigma associated with it.

Some forces have also introduced in-house wellbeing initiatives, employee assistance programmes and employed mental health counsellors to support existing Occupational Health provision, but there is always room to expand these initiatives, particularly as the same departments have faced significant resource and staffing cuts in recent austerity drives.

Policing is often described as a vocation, and with greater civilisation and crossover between warranted and non-warranted colleagues, this extends to police staff.

Having joined the force of choice, many spend their remaining working years committed to policing through a variety of roles and they too become immersed in policing culture; dealing with a wide range of volatility and cynicism, tragedy, and success, may shape their self-identity.

Police culture and canteen culture has been described in various terms, often suggesting that any given group shares or adapts to external problems and looks to address them internally, often through masculine dominance. But there is some suggestion that different roles, ranks, and departments have a variety of cultures.

Changes may also be afoot with the introduction the 20,000 officer uplift and the values and skills of younger in service officers who might be more acceptant of academic problem-solving and community engagement.

However, as forces strive to encourage applications from a more diverse community, there is a suspicion some of the established cultural traits continue.

Camaraderie and advice

We should remember that culture should not (always) be viewed in a negative light. The reassuring sense of camaraderie that close-knit, effective teamwork brings can be inclusive, particularly when dealing with personal crisis.

Having been part of many teams that provide advice through shared humour on employment, relationships, frustration, sadness, marriage, divorce, birth and death, where better to informally explore these topics than the police canteen?

If we can use storytelling as a pedagogical tool in education or healthcare, the workplace canteen seems an ideal opportunity to tell a story, recall your experiences or provide some advice.

Sadly, the removal of police canteens and introduction of staggered shifts, refreshment breaks, single-crewing policies and the introduction of mobile technology, means there are fewer opportunities to meet your team and share your thoughts.

The reluctance of police staff and officers to disclose mental ill-health is attributed to many factors, not least the clear concern that they will be seen by peers and supervisors as malingers.

A [national study in 2019](#) by Bell and Palmer-Conn found that only 34% of police officers and 44% of police staff would inform their manager if they had a mental illness. Similarly, excellent

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of police staff from mental health managers if they have a mental illness. Similarly, [research in 2018](#) for the Police Federation of England and Wales suggests that mental ill-health and PTSD is significantly underreported.

We must ask ourselves why, and what can we do to improve reporting, identify common links, and tackle the root causes with a range of partnership work? If stigma is a barrier, how can those who have ownership for staff policies deliver a range of services to improve support and advice their staff?

If this disclosure of a mental illness to a police supervisor or colleague carries the highest fear of stigma and discrimination at work using the Police Mental Health Stigma Scale ([Stuart, 2017](#)), we must work together to reduce this fear of stigma and ensure that our colleagues see the request for help as a positive step, not one of personal failure.

How are you?

The removal of police canteens and opportunities to socialise, share humour, hopes, fears and expectations – even for short periods of time – over calorie-laden meals, weak tea, mismatched cutlery and cracked plates means you may miss the one opportunity to offer a stranger, friend, colleague, or peer, kind words.

The phrase ‘How are you?’ may allow the recipient to start a long journey to address the stigma associated with mental ill-health.

Working collaboratively as part of inclusive and visionary leadership is a key trait recognised by the [College of Policing Competency Value Framework](#). It is all well and good having multi-chapter force policies and over-worked or outsourced HR staff to deal with these issues when they are formally raised, but sometimes we just need to chat without appointment and show we care.

Looking forwards to problem solve should always be encouraged, but sometimes we must look to the past in case it can contribute to the solution. A canteen or night-kitchen is a great place to start and where possible, supervisors should encourage their team to meet informally to chat about their day.

And don't forget the sausages.

About the authors



Nick Kealey is a Lecturer in the Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing Studies at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). Nick is an experienced former Merseyside Police Sergeant who worked closely with a variety of agencies including Mersey Care NHS as part of multi-agency partnership to identify and improve the support available to service users and those with mental ill-health. Alongside his teaching role, Nick – a graduate of LMJU – works with students at the University to prepare them for police officer, police staff and special constable interviews.



Dr Sean Bell is a Lecturer in the Open University's Policing Organisation & Practice team, having previously been Module Leader on The Professional Policing Degree and Policing Studies Degree at Liverpool John Moores University. Prior to joining academia Sean was a Merseyside Police officer for 31 years, the last 11 at the rank of Inspector; for the last three years of his police career he was seconded full-time to Merseyside Police Federation as Deputy Secretary. Sean has a particular interest in mental health.

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12 Responses to “Sausages and storytelling: The benefits of police canteen culture”



rh533 says:

[7th August 2021 at 10:52 am](#) (Edit)

Interesting article thank you. Hopefully the emergence of academic interest in police welfare will see a more rounded approach to police culture in general. In 1986, Mollie Weatheritt criticised the ‘foregone conclusion research’ carried out by internal police departments. Experiments always seemed to be successful.... Ironically, much the same thing seems to have happened, with a few notable exceptions, with academic research into police culture, which started with ‘classic’ studies carried out in the 1970s/80s in the UK. These saw police culture as mostly negative – racism, sexism etc and probably rightly so. But these officers joined up in the 1960s/70s and we are now not one but two generations onwards. Officers are now in the main, more socially aware out of all recognition to those of 50 years ago. Yet many academic studies still cling to the results of that time, supplemented by small-scale qualitative research and that in jurisdictions which may be thousands of miles away from the UK. It is hard to avoid the perception that their conclusions are filtered through the prisms of preconceptions and ideology. What I think we need is a large-scale study to reset the clock and ascertain, free of these factors, what police culture actually looks like in the 2020s. Maybe the interest in welfare will start that process.

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Johndehayesuod says:

[8th August 2021 at 2:17 pm](#) (Edit)

As a former police officer, supervisor and Fed rep, I agree with the findings, especially the important role that supervisors play in identifying welfare issues.

Was it just my old force, or does every force have this desire to move supervisors around every few months? Whilst this might be great for the personal development of those individuals (although I'd argue that it has the opposite effect) it does nothing for the team that keeps getting different people “looking after” them.

To be an effective supervisor, one has to know the individuals and understand their moods and motivations. This relationship takes time to develop. After a time, the supervisor can quickly identify when something is not quite right – and then hopefully do something about it!

So, not only bring back canteens, how about stopping the marginalisation of sergeants



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...not only bring even concerns, now about stopping the merry-go-round of sergeants so that they can actually work with a team for a long period and maybe tackle some of the welfare issues head on?

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 **Martin G** says:

[9th August 2021 at 8:29 am](#) [\(Edit\)](#)

Observations are spot on. The Sunday breakfast, with turns at playing chef (resulting in very mixed quality of fare...) was a tradition across the service when I started, and an excellent opportunity for teams to come together in the manner described (after washing the cars with a brush... always an odd one).

Teams need these informal sessions and I do hope that they make a return. Nothing better for bringing folk together than the breaking of bread (or sausages...)

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 **SJ Lennie** says:

[9th August 2021 at 9:56 am](#) [\(Edit\)](#)

rh533

Have a read:

Lennie, Sarah-Jane, E. Crozier Sarah, and Anna Sutton. "Robocop-The depersonalisation of police officers and their emotions: A diary study of emotional labor and burnout in front line British police officers." International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice 61 (2020): 100365.

Lennie, S. J., Sutton, A., & Crozier, S. (2021). Psychodrama and emotional labour in the police: A mutually beneficial methodology for researchers and participants. Methods in Psychology, 100066.

Yes it is my research – I was a serving officer for 18 years, now academic, my focus is on qualitative research.

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 **SJ Lennie** says:

[9th August 2021 at 9:57 am](#) [\(Edit\)](#)

An excellent piece and on point.

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 **kendal** says:

[9th August 2021 at 11:41 am](#) [\(Edit\)](#)

So much of this article rang true, there's not much that couldn't be solved with a cup of tea on parade or a block breakfast on a weekend, it's a shame that all these experiences are now memories rather than regular occurrences.

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 **Brian Murphy** says:

[10th August 2021 at 8:14 am](#) [\(Edit\)](#)

Why does management not listen to what officers and staff have been saying for years, but will listen to an academic. This is not news. Hopefully now that it has the stamp of academia on it we may see some changes and the return of safe places to decompress and process the traumas of policing.

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 **mycroft** says:

[10th August 2021 at 1:36 pm](#) [\(Edit\)](#)

As someone who joined the police in the 60s I do take exception to the sweeping generalisation by RH533, as to the claims of our generation being racist and sexist as being 'probably rightly so'. How dare he – or she. Should I accept with equal enthusiasm, and lack of evidence, that he, or she, is of a generation of coppers that are all now as bent as social media suggests? I hope any further debate is of a higher standard and evidence based. The need for evidence was hammered into me firstly as a PC and reinforced in academia.

As a very long-retired middle ranker, and Fed rep, who obtained degrees after retiring, and thus one who can see from both sides of the graduate/non-graduate argument, it disappoints me that nobody seems to have spotted the single serious fault in this particular reinvention of the wheel.

Is there any level of trust between so called colleagues these days? Is anywhere safe to have a free conversation? I suspect not. This is not just about sympathetic supervisory officers having more opportunity to 'bond', it is about risking exposing oneself- and potentially losing one's career and income by the use of a single word that may have become 'unacceptable' to some snowflake.

From what I see, and hear from serving officers, trust is often non-existent on many shift groups. These are days when even in one's private home, officers have found a colleague reporting them for saying the wrong thing. I am not talking about serious misconduct here but something that may not conform to today's ever changing wokism. I can just imagine the complaints that might follow if some snowflake PC is asked to take a turn at cooking the shift's fry up! You would need a risk assessment for every shift member.

Where I now live we have a police club that is a mile from the police station. Serving officers will not use it, they say they have no desire to mix with their shift when off duty. I somehow doubt they would see new canteens as bonding opportunities they would take advantage of.

Understanding any decline in trust amongst colleagues might make a useful research area.

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generation of police officers



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 rodnuz3 says:

[11th August 2021 at 7:29 am](#) [\(Edit\)](#)

SJ Lennie – thanks for your references which I will read with interest.

Mycroft – I'm sorry that you have taken exception to my comment about police racism/sexism in the 1960s and 70s.


However, the academic evidence is pretty overwhelming. Reiner's 'Politics of the Police' is always a good starting point for this kind of enquiry. In the section on 'racial prejudice' he states that 'my own interviews in Bristol in 1973-4 found that hostile and suspicious views of blacks were frequently offered quite spontaneously in the context of interviews concerning police work in general'. This included 25% of all interviewees and 35% of those in the central division. 'One uniformed constable summed up the pattern: 'The police are trying to appear unbiased in regard to race relations. But if you asked them you'd find that 90 per cent of the force are against coloured immigrants'. There are also references to more supporting studies than you could shake a stick at.

Of course, an important caveat is that there is little evidence that police attitudes are different from those of wider society. Most of us just conform with the dominant discourse of the day. The 1960s/70s was a rougher-edged world which fortunately for those on the wrong end of dominant attitudes, we are slowly and sometimes painfully moving away from.

Finally, apologies to the authors of the original article which this thread has strayed away from somewhat.

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 Sean Bell OU says:

[11th August 2021 at 8:35 am](#) [\(Edit\)](#)


Thank you for comments and continuing the debate. This makes for interesting reading from Police Care UK.

The research, conducted by the University of Cambridge and funded by Police Care UK, engaged with over 18,000 officers and staff to establish the UK's first prevalence rate for PTSD in policing and the world's first Complex-PTSD rate in a working population. With 90% of officers and staff exposed to trauma, some on a daily basis, 65% did not think that this is well managed in their force. There is more research underway which looks at how forces' working conditions can affect PTSD levels and this will be published next year.

<https://www.policecare.org.uk/the-job-and-the-life-research-report/>

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 pm_sandford says:

[11th August 2021 at 10:56 am](#) [\(Edit\)](#)

I enjoyed reading this article, simply because it brought back fond memories of sitting with colleagues around the table at 0540hrs, briefing over a brew and waiting for the sergeant to slide the briefing file across the table to whoever was given the privilege of scanning its pages and sharing the news of the day. As the probationer on the rota (or block, depending upon your force) this task was often given to me, along with filling the largest teapot I'd ever seen and calling the canteen to put the order in for some breakfast bites at refs later that morning.

I joined the police in the late 90s and these gatherings around the table were so important. It's not only where I picked up tips and started to learn about parts of the job that none of my trainers or tutors had mentioned (we all discover our time at the regional training centre only scraped the surface!), it's also where I got to know these characters I was now working alongside; this team of people that might not always agree, but regardless of any differences in opinion, would work together in facing the challenges that the shift would bring and make sure we were all safe by the end of it.

Yes, the article has some sweeping generalisations that other comments have touched on. I do think the general thrust of the article is right though – that the camaraderie and bonding which helps unite a team can be nurtured in environments such as the canteen, kitchen or break room. And of course, having a close-knit team can help with identifying any potential issues in wellbeing and mental health. But I don't think the underlying issue is the closure of canteens.

My operational experience began just at the cusp of canteens being closed. This was happening in many forces and what it typically left was a staffed canteen at the force HQ and no catering facilities in other parts of the estate. Something else was being closed too. Stamped out, actually. That was canteen culture.

There were many changes occurring in policing at the time. Two prevailing issues were budget cuts (seems to have been going forever, doesn't it?) and the need to change attitudes and behaviours following reviews such as the Macpherson report.

Why pick canteens as the place to associate with aspects of workplace culture that needed to change? It would be naive to think that any problems that were festering in small pockets of the police service were being cultivated exclusively in canteens.

Did we end up in a position where decisions to make savings by closing canteens were made easier by taking the view that the attitudes and behaviours which needed to change were emanating from canteens? I don't know. I hope not.

What did happen though, was ending up in a position where those sat around the canteen table became very conscious of the drive for political correctness and that chairs were being shuffled more and more to the left.

It's not the absence of canteens that is the problem. The issue is trying to ensure nobody is offended, pretty much about anything.

Mycroft's comment above hits the mark accurately in several places. Mycroft's boldness in saying what most other people are thinking is quite refreshing but I must add that I don't believe the problem comes down entirely to not being able to trust colleagues. I think it's fair to say many of us no longer trust ourselves to come out with the right form of words which we can guarantee will not offend – it's often best to not say anything. This issue isn't unique to policing, it's ubiquitous in society now.

I can't think of any police station or office that does not have a kitchen or break room. The fact these locations are not staffed canteens isn't really the issue. As the article says, staggered shifts and refreshment breaks, single-crewing policies and the introduction of mobile technology, means there is simply less opportunity to get colleagues around a table – whether it's a table in a night kitchen, break room or staffed canteen.

Those that do make the most of opportunities to get around the table will still find themselves picking their words carefully, even if they do choose to chat about their mental health. And while this discussion is happening, the person that did remember to bring the sausages sits silently wondering how they'll break the news that they've forgotten a plant-based option and now they're panicking because they think the sergeant mentioned being a vegan, or was it a pescatarian? Will the Cumberland sausages cause offence? Maybe they won't mention the sausages after all.

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[Martin Hewitt](#)
Talk to Bernard Rix

[3h](#)





Ubald_Rehman says:

[11th August 2021 at 11:39 am](#) [\(Edit\)](#)

Great article! Years as a police researcher I observed the value canteens provided for exactly the points raised in this piece – that space to offload, talk, laugh, and relax. Often canteen culture is viewed negatively but I often saw the benefits of this. When canteens were being closed in the Metropolitan Police Service where I am employed, I did wonder what could ever replace them where this interaction could/can take place, what space would be possible to allow our officers and staff to come together, to be together. During the pandemic, I noticed how officers and staff needed such spaces after patrolling the streets of London for so many hours but find canteens closed, poor provision of hot drinks and warm snacks but also little time to really unwind. We need these spaces back if we are to value the mental wellbeing of our frontline officers and staff.

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