

**FEATURE:**

# Closing the ‘repair shop’: How has the loss of canteens and shared spaces affected police wellbeing?



26th March 2024

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OPEN



**Among the less visible effects of a decade of UK police funding cuts is the loss of spaces where officers can rest, eat, and talk to each other, a loss that could increase the risks of personal and professional isolation, and damage officer wellbeing; a new study led by Dr Carina O'Reilly (University of Lincoln), Nick Kealey (Liverpool John Moores University) and Dr Sean Bell (Open University) will look at how the provision of rest spaces has changed, and the impact on**

## **police officers and their wellbeing – and you can get involved.**

Changes to policing over the last 10-15 years mean officers are more and more isolated. Many forces stagger duty times, meaning officers may parade for duty or finish their shift in twos or threes, or even alone. Handheld devices and laptops have reduced the need to return to the station at all.

Increased operational demands mean refreshment breaks are curtailed and are rarely timed to allow officers to come together. Finally, with the gradual disappearance of police canteens and other shared spaces, those who do have a base are less likely to leave their office and take proper breaks.

However, no research to date has studied the effects of this loss of shared rest time and the spaces where they happen on police officers and staff. Our new survey, which will go out to officers in the Police Federation's March bulletin, seeks to change that.

Policing is a traumatic occupation: officers regularly experience events that they find hard to talk about with friends and family outside the service. Shared spaces provide opportunities for managing health and wellbeing ([Loftus, 2010](#); [Atherton, 2012](#)), storytelling ([Fletcher, 1996](#); [van Hulst, 2017](#)), and bonding and camaraderie ([Rowe and Rowe, 2021](#); [Wieslander, 2021](#)).

However, with the loss of police canteens and other shared spaces from the police estate, and the increase in co-location with other services, it is no longer clear how, when and where these interactions can take place.

The term 'canteen culture' comes with a lot of baggage, and is often used as shorthand for problematic police cultures that facilitate unethical behaviour. The pressure on forces to address perceptions of damaging internal cultures that give rise to legitimacy crises may have meant that 'canteen culture' as an idea has been rolled in with the canteens themselves.

Certainly, there has been little public discussion about the way that these spaces might in fact support police wellbeing – and how that in turn might improve officer morale and lead to better policing. However, previous research has indicated some of the potential benefits of such spaces and what happens in them.

## Managing health and wellbeing

Policing comes with its own unique set of stressors. Officers can be socially isolated from 'civilian' friends and family.

Storytelling and associated camaraderie provide a safe place for officers to rationalise police work and make sense of the traumas they encounter ([Kingshott and Prinsloo, 2004](#); [Loftus, 2009](#); [Loftus, 2010](#)).

Such interactions can be thought of as the "repair shop of policing" ([Waddington, 1999, p.295](#)), which allows officers to cope with their role and its unique and isolating expectations.

This loss can potentially have wider consequences beyond police wellbeing. Poor perceptions of organisational legitimacy (when officers feel that their organisation does not treat them fairly) can lead to poorer interactions with the public: when officers feel their wellbeing is not a priority, they may be less able to behave in ways which support wider police legitimacy ([Van Craen and Skogan, 2017](#)).

## Storytelling

Stories may be thought of as 'swinging the lamp' or 'chewing the fat', but psychologists and educationalists know there is more to them.

Tales of operational encounters with both good and bad outcomes let other officers learn about policing in a safe place, in which the listener can identify with the storyteller, imagining and reflecting on how they would have acted in similar circumstances – working through situations in a way that's risk free.

Police storytelling is therefore a common part of education and training. Stories are used by experienced officers to initiate recruits, sharing their experiences, and helping them learn through 'war stories' about the threats and dangers of policing.

Storytelling can also serve to ingrain established policing culture to preserve the values and beliefs that police officers espouse ([Abma, 2003](#); [van Hulst, 2013](#)).

Storytelling is an informal curriculum which supports officers' young in service in their occupational learning and developing their practical knowledge and skills ([McNulty, 1994](#); [Conti, 2011](#)).

Police learning is not limited to the classroom, and forces are filled with storytellers. Members recount stories to one another in the locker room and parade rooms and refreshment areas.

Such story telling supports self-identification, self-enhancement and managing emotions, enabling officers to make sense of work-based experiences and in turn the ability to wield knowledge and experiential learning ([Rantatalo and Karp, 2018](#)).

Stories and the places they are told are therefore integral to recruits developing their craft. Yet we know very little about what happens when the places that stories are told start to disappear.

### **Bonding and camaraderie**

The inherent stress of the job means that police culture is centred around trust, friendship, camaraderie, and mutual support. This provides a support mechanism in an occupation where officers are not keen – and may be unable – to share their experiences with those outside the organisation ([Bell, Palmer-Conn, and Kealey, 2022](#)).

Research into police occupational culture suggests that officers tend to (re)tell stories of high risk and high excitement, which celebrate courage and maintain close bonds of occupational solidarity ([Rowe and Rowe, 2021](#)).

Such 'war stories' provide a moral-emotional identity for officers in their fight against crime and is a cultural bonding agent. Stories are a vehicle for sharing knowledge and building camaraderie ([Kingshott and Prinsloo, 2004](#); [Cockcroft, 2005](#)).

For new recruits, the opportunity to socialise and promote camaraderie with established officers is a gateway to integration and acceptance ([Kurtz and Upton, 2017](#)).

### **Conclusion**

Opportunities for police officers to socialise in a relatively safe internal environment have been gradually removed by austerity measures and the widespread loss of stations and closure of

canteens ([Hesketh and Williams, 2017](#)). This has reduced opportunities for officers to interact in the workplace ([Turner and Jenkins, 2019](#); [Bullock and Garland, 2020](#)).

Crucially, this means that officers and staff have lost a place in which to safely share concerns and anxieties about traumatic aspects of their role ([Turner and Jenkins, 2019](#); [Bell, Palmer-Conn and Kealey, 2022](#)). There are potential consequences to this for police wellbeing, retention, and for organisational and by extension public legitimacy.

Despite this, there has been very little research on the current state of the police estate, the changes to provision of shared spaces in policing, and the effects of this on officers.

Our study aims to change this. We want to understand how shared spaces such as canteens are used by police officers in ways that contribute to wellbeing.

We want to know how the provision of space to rest and to spend time with others has changed; what officers do in those spaces and what those activities mean; and what happens when shared spaces disappear – where do officers go to eat, to talk about their experiences, to learn how to ‘be’ an officer?

With the help of the Police Federation of England and Wales, the Scottish Police Federation, and the British Transport Police Federation, we’ll be sending out a survey shortly – keep an eye out for it in your next Fed bulletins.

We’ll also be asking for volunteers for interviews, and we would really like to hear from forces who would be happy for us to come and look at how existing shared spaces are used. You can contact us on the following emails: [\[email protected\]](#); [\[email protected\]](#); and [\[email protected\]](#).

## About the Authors

**Dr Carina O’Reilly** is Policing Insight’s Academic Editor, and a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Lincoln. Her research interests include neighbourhood policing, confidence and legitimacy. Prior to joining Lincoln, Carina worked at IHS Jane’s for seven years as a writer, editor and senior analyst on European security and organised crime; and subsequently led and taught a range of Policing degrees at Anglia Ruskin University. Carina has a Masters degree from Cambridge University in Social and Political Sciences and holds a Masters in Strategic

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**Nick Kealey** is a Lecturer in the Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing Studies at Liverpool John Moores University (LMJU). 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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This article can be found here:

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