

Police Wellbeing in England and Wales: organisational and individual perspectives

Phythian, Rebecca, Nathan Birdsall, Stuart Kirby, Emily Cooper, Zoe Posner, and Laura Boulton. 2023, '[Organisational and individual perspectives of police wellbeing in England and Wales](#)', *The Police Journal*, vol. 96, no. 1, pp. 128-152.

Introduction and research question/purpose

Poor psychological wellbeing is a serious problem in policing in England and Wales. Stress-related absence has risen sharply, and the authors cite a 98% increase in mental health-related absence between 2010 and 2017. The study asks whether organisational and individual perspectives on police wellbeing align.

Specifically, it asks whether the organisation's view of wellbeing (i.e what the forces say they provide) matches the view of the people who work there (i.e what officers and staff say about how HR policies affected their wellbeing).

The research looked at this question using survey material (for individual perspectives) and secondary data supplied by Oscar Kilo in 2018 (to assess the organisational view). It was commissioned by the National Police Wellbeing Service.

Definitions/distinctions

The literature splits police stress into two kinds:

- operational stress (eg. trauma, conflict, high-stakes decisions)
- organisational stress: (eg. overtime, culture, poor management, inadequate training)

The authors note that organisations and managers in police agencies are expected to support their staff and that there are many policies, programs and campaigns at national and local levels in policing. They make the further distinction between:

- *Individual factors*: things a person can control, or that they experience themselves. For example, how a person copes with stress (are they problem-focused, emotion-focused or avoidant?); their level of personal resilience; whether are they healthy and do they have a healthy lifestyle; their use of support services and whether work stress spills into home life.
- *Organisational factors*: things that come from the organisation and its management. For example, inadequate training and overtime demands; police culture, negative relationships with managers and peers; poor leadership and line manager behaviour; specific HR policies and processes such as absence management, promotion, recruitment and grievance; and whether the organisation meets staff expectations.

Note: The authors see operational stress as neither an individual nor an organisational factor, rather it is as an inherent part of the work that both individuals and organisations have to manage.

Methodology

The study is a mixed-methods secondary analysis of anonymised 2018 data supplied by Oscar Kilo.

- *The organisational perspective* came from 18 Blue Light Wellbeing Frameworks (BLWF)¹, each was completed by a nominated person for a force.
- *The individual perspective* came from an HR policy review survey given to officers and staff at four forces, asking which HR policies helped or harmed their wellbeing and why.

Analysis: the BLWF ratings were coded and analysed in SPSS (chi-square, plus a total development score from 0 to 188 used to rank forces). The free text was thematically analysed in NVivo, with an inter-rater reliability check. The survey responses were analysed through word frequency and thematic analysis in NVivo.

Bias and limits:

- Data was incomplete and inconsistent since the 18 frameworks of the BLWF weren't filled in to the same standard.
- The quality of data in the BLWF depended on the knowledge and understanding of the person completing, after all each framework was filled in by a nominated individual or small group (compared to say, a systematic audit of the force)
- The survey covered only four forces, and respondents may be self-selected, either very satisfied or very dissatisfied.
- The individual data did not record role or rank.

Findings

Organisational view (from the BLWF):

- Forces rated themselves 'most developed' on absence management and creating the environment.
- Leadership was rated as mostly 'in development'.
- Personal resilience and protecting the workforce were significantly underdeveloped.
- Most forces rated themselves as 'in development' with total scores ranged from 17 to 147 (a median of 118.5)
- Line managers were seen as central to wellbeing across every section.

¹ The BLWF framework has 94 statements across six sections: Leadership, Absence Management, Creating the Environment, Mental Health, Personal Resilience and Protecting the Workforce. Forces rated each statement as 'underdeveloped', 'in development' or 'fully developed', with a prompt for an explanation in a free text box.



- In the free text, two themes emerged:
 1. Staff support with subthemes of management responsibility, communication, individual support and healthy lifestyle
 2. Working environment with subthemes of creating a safe space, and reactive and proactive support.

Individual view (from the HR survey):

- When asked which policy had helped their wellbeing the most, officers and staff mostly answered by saying 'none' or 'unaware of any'. Respondents cited lack of awareness, poor past experiences with HR, and feeling like "a number".
- Policies that were seen as helpful were: flexible working, leave, return-to-work support, and mental and physical health services such as counselling, occupational health and physiotherapy.
- Policies that were seen as harmful were: absence management, promotion, recruitment and grievance. The reasons cited were a lack of transparency, consistency and fairness, and stress caused by the process itself. In particular failure to consider individual circumstances such as disability and limited support.
- Absence management, which forces rated as 'fully developed', was widely described by officers and staff as punitive. The Bradford Factor² was singled out as the problem. Some staff cited taking annual leave rather than sick leave for fear of triggering the Bradford Factor. Some staff said they worried about "hitting the Bradford mark" while sick, and some took annual leave instead of sick leave for fear of breaching it.

Discussion

The study found a disconnect between the perspectives of organisations and workforces. Specifically, it found that while the progress in supporting police wellbeing in policies was encouraging, it also found that:

- While a policy can be well established on paper (which is how forces score themselves), it does not mean that it is supportive to personnel in practice. Absence management was especially seen as harmful by staff, while forces rated it as fully developed.
- This highlights that there is a clear disconnect between what organisations believe they provide and what employees experience.

² The Bradford Factor is a formula some employers use to score employee absence. Organisations set trigger points, and reaching one typically leads to a warning, a formal meeting or disciplinary action. The exact thresholds vary by employer. The Bradford Factor gives more weight to frequent short absences than to a single long one, on the theory that repeated short absences disrupt the workplace more. The formula is $B = S^2 \times D$, where 'S' is the number of separate absence spells (occasions) in a set period, usually 52 weeks and 'D' is the total number of days absent in that period.



- Personal resilience and workforce protection, which were areas closest to individual experience, were the least developed.

Aside from these overarching findings, the authors highlight several other points:

- Line managers both enable and inhibit wellbeing, because the quality of support depends on the individual manager. Managers need awareness and emotional intelligence, and policies must be well applied as well as well written.
- In general, forces showed good practice in proactivity, early intervention, listening to staff feedback and using data to target support.
- There is no shared definition of 'wellbeing' or 'success'. Organisations may count an existing policy as a success. On the other hand, employees tend to judge whether it works.
- The names of policies and initiatives vary across the forces. The authors found that there were few interventions that have actually been evaluated, they also concluded that what works in one force may not transfer to another.
- A general conclusion was that traditional management structures and policies no longer match the force today given the complexity of modern policing demand. There is much room to align organisational and individual perspectives.