

Supervisory support

Supervisors play an important role supporting officers and staff who have been assaulted. They also need to be aware of any issues that might increase the chance of confrontation, or impact someone's wellbeing.

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5 mins read

Guideline – supervisory support

Chief constables should ensure supervisors have the knowledge, skills and capacity to:

- support those officers and staff who have been assaulted
- have awareness of the factors that may escalate conflict in order to prevent assaults against officers and staff, and ensure appropriate use of force

These factors could relate to officers and staff (eg, wellbeing and resilience, stress, being a victim of assault), the public or situations.

Awareness can be maintained by:

- routine informal debriefing
- regular one-to-ones
- checking any patterns in data on use of force, assaults against the police, and police/public injuries

Evidence summary

Someone's ability to remain calm and communicate effectively in difficult situations was identified by practitioners as being associated with their level of resilience and wellbeing. Supervisors were seen as having a key role to play in recognising wellbeing issues and supporting their staff. The evidence review identified two studies that looked at the impact of emotional exhaustion on use of force with mixed results, and three studies that found previous injury on the job was related to

greater use of force.

Empirical evidence

Limited

Practitioner evidence

Available

The importance of the supervisor role

Supervisors have an important role to play both in supporting officers and staff who have been assaulted and encouraging reflective practice (eg, by debriefing difficult encounters and encouraging officers to consider alternative options when tackling future encounters). Supervisors also need to be aware of any background issues that could lead to confrontation escalating. They can use regular one-to-ones and informal debriefs, as well as the results of data analysis about the use of force, assaults and police/public injuries, to understand what support officers and staff in their teams need (eg, training, continuing professional development and access to wellbeing services). Forces will need to help supervisors who lack the knowledge, skills and/or capacity to support officers and staff who have been assaulted, so that this role is not seen as being an extra burden.

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Wellbeing and resilience

Background issues – on their own or in combination – can affect interactions between the police and public, and make it more likely that these encounters will deteriorate and/or result in force being used. Practitioners identified wellbeing and resilience as important factors that can contribute to conflict escalating. They felt their ability to stay calm and communicate effectively during confrontational encounters was strongly associated with their personal levels of resilience and wellbeing. They also talked about how the emotional labour involved in their public-facing roles, and the abuse they can face, can affect their wellbeing and resilience, and lead to them becoming 'hardened'.

Practical advice from the front line – wellbeing and resilience

- Debriefing incidents was cited by some officers as a useful way for officers and staff to voice and reflect on issues as a team, and prevent them taking those issues 'home' with them.
- The need for supervisors to develop positive team and supervisory relationships was highlighted:
 - because officers and staff can be good at hiding stress and other wellbeing issues
 - to enable people to spot any behaviour that is out of the norm
- Regular one-to-ones were seen as essential opportunities for officers and staff to open up about problems. Supervisors need to be prepared to have these conversations and, where appropriate, encourage and help officers and staff to access support (eg, local welfare services).
- The bravado and 'banter' sometimes on display at shift briefings, and the belief that being placed on restricted duties would create more work for colleagues, were both thought to be potential barriers to officers and staff opening up about wellbeing issues.

Stress and wellbeing resources

Stress

Officers and staff had consistent views on the impact of stress on their decision-making during confrontational situations. They said being stressed:

- made it more likely that they would become task-focused, make rash decisions, lose motor skills, forget their training and communicate poorly
- lowered their tolerance levels, meaning they could react or use force sooner than they would do normally
- would inhibit their ability to listen and come up with creative solutions to the situation

Complex police demand, coupled with resource pressures, were thought to contribute to escalation of conflict because they created an increasingly stressful environment for officers and staff. In particular, the accumulation of jobs during a shift and need for situations to be resolved quickly were specifically felt to make decision-making more pressurised.

Some also felt that stress and stress-related illness were not always taken as seriously as they should be by supervisors.

Being a victim of assault

Assaults against police officers and staff are offences under the [Assaults on Emergency Workers \(Offences\) Act 2018](#), and are punishable by up to 12 months in prison. Officers and staff should be encouraged to report any assaults they experience and should also expect to be treated in the same way as a member of the public who has been assaulted.

Forces have adopted the Police Federation's seven-point investigation plan for dealing with assaults against the police. It highlights some specific responsibilities for supervisors, including:

- completing a safety incident report with the victim
- seeing the victim as soon as possible after the incident and discussing a welfare plan (recognising that officers and staff may downplay the impact of the incident)
- informing the relevant senior leaders of the assault, so they can discuss it at the daily management meeting and identify any organisational learning

The evidence review identified research suggesting officers and staff who were victims of assault might be more likely to use force to resolve conflict in the future. The experience of being assaulted could affect their perceptions of risk and encourage them to go 'hands-on' quicker next time, to prevent a repeat of the incident. While completely understandable, this could, paradoxically, increase the risks to their own safety, and prevent them from using more proportionate responses.

The national police wellbeing service, also known as Oscar Kilo, supports forces in their wellbeing provision to officers and staff, such as how best to deal with trauma.

- [Visit Oscar Kilo](#)

Three other levels of support are typically available to officers and staff who have been assaulted, including:

- many forces provide local welfare services for those who have been physically and/or psychologically affected by assaults

- occupational health may provide additional support if these issues affect officers' or staff members' work
- a range of national charities extend the services that are available locally

They include:

- [Flint House](#)
- [Disabled Police Association](#)
- [Police Care UK](#)
- [Police Dependants' Trust](#)
- [Blue Lamp Foundation](#)
- [Defence Medical Welfare Service](#)
- [The Police Treatment Centres](#)
- [Find out how to respond to trauma in policing in our practical guide](#)

Tags

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