

Is there an impact of repeatedly working with traumatised victims of rape and child abuse on specialist police officers?

This research project aims to gain a greater understanding of the potential impact of working with traumatized victims of rape and child abuse on a daily basis.

Key details

Lead institution	Canterbury Christ Church University
Principal researcher(s)	Jim Foley
Police region	South East
Project start date	March 2019
Date due for completion	September 2024

Research context

Secondary trauma has been widely studied over the last 30 years and relates to exposure to trauma through a first-hand account or narrative of a traumatic event by another. This subsequent cognitive or emotional representation of that event may result in a set of symptoms and reactions that parallel PTSD (for example, re-experiencing, avoidance and hyperarousal) in individuals (Figley, 1995; Cieslak and others, 2014).

The impact of secondary trauma caused by repeated exposure to traumatised victims has been widely studied within a number of 'caring' professions yet the impact of this type of work on the mental health of 'secondary investigators' (those who investigate these crimes) has not as yet been explored.

Whilst all policing roles are clearly demanding, it has been recognised that some of the most stressful and challenging cases for an officer to investigate are those involving violence, child

abuse and serious sexual abuse (Astin, 1997; Brown and others, 1999; Skogstad and others, 2013).

Research into secondary trauma and mental health in policing, particularly for those that investigate rape and child abuse, is an important piece of work to undertake at a time when there is an increasing demand in the reporting and investigation of these offences. This area which is significantly under researched and will help to inform understanding of the impact of working with traumatised victims within the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), and perhaps nationally.

Aim

This PHD is split into a number of parts which together aims to gain a greater understanding of the potential impact of working with traumatized victims of rape and child abuse on a daily basis.

Research methodology

1. Literature review (complete, awaits publication)

Systematized literature review undertaken to identify what research currently exists in relation to secondary trauma and PTSD in UK Policing and identify common themes and gaps from the research.

2. Quantitative research

The design was a cross sectional quantitative study accessed via a hyper link sent via email to all relevant staff (those that work within the Child Abuse and Sexual Offences (CASO) command and hosted on a server outside of MPS systems.

The link was sent so that it could be completed anywhere and, on any device, and within the front page an email address was asked for. This was just so that officers could receive their results, as well as the details of support available to them if taking the survey had impacted on them in any way, or they wanted additional support.

Between 17th January 2019 and 18th February 2019, the survey link was sent to all staff who work in CASO.

This included:

- a participant information sheet
- a consent form
- demographic and occupational information (age, ethnicity, marital status, sex, years of service, years on unit, duty type, unit and rank/role)

The survey then asked questions using the following screening tools.

- Depression (Kronke, Spitzer, and Williams, 2001)
- Anxiety (Spitzer and others, 2006)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD (Breslau and others, 1999)
- Social support (Sarason and others, 1983)

These tools were chosen due to clinical validity of their use and the relatively short time it takes to complete them, which was important so that officers would finish.

In total 353 responses were received which showed that a number of officers had clinical indicators of PTSD, depression and anxiety. Formal analysis and statistical significance in relation to tenure, gender and social support is currently ongoing.

3. Qualitative research (being developed – estimated completion March 2022)

Using a 'Grounded Theory' approach (Strauss and Corbin, 2008), semi-structured interviews will be conducted on a number of officers who investigate rape and child sexual abuse.

4. Case Study research (being developed – estimated completion March 2023)

Likely to be a single case study (Yin, 2014) on an officer who is resilient to working with traumatized victims to understand 'why' they can cope yet others may not.

The findings from all these elements of the PhD will help understand why some officers suffer from repeatedly working with traumatized victims and hopefully generate an understanding of the theory of police trauma, informing future support for officers and academic research in this critical area of policing.

This project is supported by the [College of Policing bursary scheme](#).

Interim reports or publications

Foley, J., & Massey, K. (2019). Police officers and post-traumatic stress disorder: Discussing the deficit in research, identification and prevention in England and Wales. *The Police Journal*, 92(1), 23-34.

Foley, J., & Massey, K. L. D. (2020). The 'cost' of caring in policing: From burnout to PTSD in police officers in England and Wales. *The Police Journal*, 0032258X20917442.