

Mental health and routine police work

The Mental Health and Routine Police Work project explores how police officers respond to mental health problems in routine, 'everyday' policing.

Key details

Lead institution	Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre
Principal researcher(s)	Prof Martin Webber and Prof Liz Hughes n.capstick@leeds.ac.uk
Police region	Yorkshire
Collaboration and partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Yorkshire Police • South Yorkshire Police
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	May 2023

Research context

A significant proportion of routine police work involves people who are experiencing mental health problems as victims, perpetrators or witnesses.

Most research to date has focused on police involvement in mental health crises. However, there are a number of areas where the evidence is lacking. This includes a better understanding of how 'mental health' is defined, conceptualised and coded by police officers within the lens of 'vulnerability', and the impact of the environment (for example limited community resources, socio-economic factors, crime levels and poor housing stock) on police engagement with people with mental health problems.

Within this context, this project will explore:

- how the police understand and interpret mental health problems
- what knowledge, skills and experience they draw upon to inform their response
- what interpersonal skills they use
- how their response varies when working with, or informed by, a mental health professional

The research team will also interview people experiencing mental distress by investigating:

- how they experience the police response
- how this varies according to the context or reason for the encounter
- how ethnicity, poverty, gender and the intersection of multiple disadvantages impact on how police respond to mental health problems

Aims

The project aims to address the gap in knowledge regarding everyday policing and mental health. It aims to illustrate the techniques, models and intervention methods used by the police when they are dealing with mental health issues in the course of their routine work. The ultimate goal is to identify what good practice may look like and how this could be replicated.

Research methodology

The team will conduct a scoping review of peer-reviewed literature exploring the ways in which police officers respond to people with a mental health problem in routine policing. It will then explore routine police practice in encounters with people with mental health problems.

The team will study the culture and behaviour of police officers by observing them undertaking their everyday work. This involves multiple qualitative methods, including:

- The ride-along method where researchers will accompany police officers in the course of their work.
- Non-participant observation methods, in which the researcher will observe police officers and the members of the public, who may have a mental health problem, as they interact in a way that tries not to attract attention to themselves. The researcher will chat casually with officers following incidents and in the course of their routine work.

- Semi-structured interviews with senior officers, to gain their perspective on officers' behaviour, responses to people with mental health problems, and what they consider to be effective.

Through combining these multiple qualitative methods the study will provide rich data and capture a wide range of examples of police work.

Summary of findings

This project was completed in December 2025.

Webber M and others. 2026. 'Mental health and routine police work: a systematic scoping review'. Health & Justice, 14, 18.

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Additional Resources

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Tags

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