

KAREN GOODALL

# TRAUMA INFORMED POLICING

Dr Karen Goodall presents findings from research projects exploring police officers' perceptions of trauma-informed practice interventions.

## TRAUMA, ADVERSITY, AND CRIME

The police are ideally positioned to be a service responding to trauma in society. Rates of trauma are notably high among people who engage in crime. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as family violence, childhood abuse and experiences of being in care, increase the likelihood of offending across the lifespan. UK prison studies also demonstrate disproportionately high rates of ACEs among inmates.

Understanding how traumatic experiences shape people's life trajectories is a core feature of becoming trauma-informed. Experiences of multiple or chronic adversity in childhood have been linked to impairments in emotion regulation, attention and impulse control, interpersonal problems and school failure, drug misuse and mental health problems. In short, trauma, especially early trauma, can be considered a significant risk factor for criminal involvement.

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Many UK police forces are now working towards a trauma-informed policing culture (Association of Directors of Public Health (ASDPH), 2021), which recognises and responds to the effects of trauma (SAMHSA, 2014). However, evaluation of trauma-related initiatives is scarce, and still, less is known about how officers perceive training. While interventions may lead to positive attitude change, changing attitudes is not always sufficient to lead to a change in practice.

This article presents insights from officers' perceptions of trauma awareness-raising initiatives in Police Scotland. The first focused on officers' perceptions of an ACEs awareness-raising session. The second ongoing study involved officers who had undertaken NHS Education Scotland (NES) online training.

## CONTEXT

Contextual relevance was highly important. Police and civilian staff participating in the NES training clearly articulated a nuanced understanding of trauma, including complex trauma. Where the contextual relevance was less clear, officers were often resistant to key messages, characterising them as 'common sense'.

*...someone having a terrible upbringing is going to end up having a difficult adulthood. I thought that was fairly self-explanatory.*

## EMPOWERMENT AND APPLICATION

Knowledge gained from interventions empowered staff to speak up on issues relating to wellbeing or mental health. However, police staff reported having limited insight into how to practically implement trauma-informed working, other than 'being a decent person'. Being trauma-aware was viewed by some as a 'soft' approach that had the potential to interfere with their capacity to do policing work. Policing work has limited procedural flexibility, and there were implicit fears about being held responsible if trauma-informed approaches compromised the safety of their colleagues or the public.

*...if you're presented with something... there's a set way that that's getting dealt with, that you can't deviate away from.*

## INDIVIDUAL VERSUS SERVICE LEVEL CHANGE

There is no single correct approach to initiating a trauma-informed police culture, and initiatives are often aimed at changing the attitudes of individuals. While senior staff highlighted that 'buy-in' from staff is essential to any service-level change, officers resisted the idea that individuals could change a culture. Instead, they noted that explicit service-level guidance was required for them to be confident in working in trauma-informed ways.

*...we have to become bold and actually document that we will support staff doing the right thing for people...but that's a step that, basically, has to come from the top down.*

## ROLES

In a trauma-informed service, every individual should have access to training. However, police and civilian staff in specific roles appeared to find the training particularly beneficial. An example is Police Custody Security Officers who are in extended contact with individuals in custody, offering an opportunity to forge a relationship and potentially route an individual towards support for core issues related to the crime.

## POLICE CULTURE

Police work is inherently traumatising, with police routinely exposed to trauma, both directly and indirectly. At the same time, officers noted that the prevailing culture requires them to appear impervious to trauma, hindering conversations about mental health and support-seeking among colleagues. Trauma interventions were viewed as potentially facilitating a cultural shift, whereby officers would have increased awareness of their own and their colleagues' mental health and coping capacity. This is important as people who work in human services tend to have a high prevalence of ACEs themselves.

*...historically, the culture of being weak existed, without a shadow of a doubt. I think we're starting to break through that now.*

## CONCLUSION

While initiatives to create awareness of trauma and its impacts have the potential to lead to positive attitude change, moving towards trauma-informed practice in policing may be slower. The latter will require workforce development and changes to organisational practice. It will require addressing the individual and cultural barriers that potentially limit individuals' capacity to work in trauma-informed ways.

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