



Interviews with Police Officers/Staff and Partners

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This study aimed to understand the personal online risks, harms and protection needs of police officers/staff and their partners. Interviews were conducted with 49 officers/staff and 12 partners. These interviews were analysed in terms of how their experiences and behaviour impacted their mental and physical well-being.

Vulnerabilities, Risks and Threats

- Participants regularly referred to threats and risks, which can broadly be grouped into *internal and external* threats and *direct and indirect* risks.
- External threats include doxing, hacking accounts, and other threats from outside sources. Family members, who are often more easily identified online, can also be used as gateways for bad actors to threaten or attempt to apply leverage over the police officer/staff member. Internal threats are identified as professional threats coming from within the Force. This includes the Force using officers/staff private social media and online information for disciplinary action.
- Direct risks are clear, explicit commentary aimed at police officers/staff and/or their family. Indirect risks are seemingly neutral information officers/staff share with others in different online contexts that may be later used to assist direct threats.

Digital Discretion and Boundary Management

- Most participants use various online services, but obscure their identity and keep settings locked down. There is a distinct behavioural change after an individual has experienced or witnessed a significant adverse online event, with settings made even more secure.
- Boundary setting between professional and personal life is a typical response to prevent potential risks spilling into officers/staff personal online life. Many officers/staff choose to have a more passive role on social media. This is considered a safer response, but is not always one they like.
- Another reason for passive online behaviour is the need to be constantly vigilant within their personal online life. This heavy burden of constant judgment calls for every online interaction, especially when considering indirect risks from even seemingly neutral interactions, can lead to higher levels of stress.
- Disengagement from personal internet use by officers/staff, in turn, shifts extra task load and judgments of online actions to their (usually) non-police and untrained partner. This can lead to negative unforeseen consequences, as untrained partners become the primary online point of contact and, therefore, also a vulnerability.

Reporting Incidents and Psychological Harm

- Mechanisms for reporting online issues and the support and response available vary within and between Forces. Even identified viable threats are judged inconsistently and responded to differently.
- Most participants considered online threats and risks as psychological harm, but many do not view it as serious as physical harm, although they feel it should be treated this seriously.
- Participants tended to frame significant threats as acceptable and commonplace within the online environment so as not to seem weak. This was often in part due to the potential long-term notes on their record relating to a mental health issue.
- It was acknowledged that the police as an organisation is improving with mental health support. However, this shift is slow, and there is still significant disparity between policy and practice.

The Changing Nature of being a Police Officer/Staff

- Many of the issues outlined above are interconnected with the changing nature of policing in the 21st century. Participants noted that the context of policing has shifted significantly since the mainstream introduction of the internet and, more specifically, social media into daily life. However, this has not been fully or realistically acknowledged within the organisation.
- Normalisation and acceptance of online trolling means that unacceptable offline behaviour is regularly accepted online, as public-facing roles 'take more stick' and it is 'part of the job'. However, participants acknowledged that online and offline spaces have become so interconnected that online activity can have a major impact in the physical world, so it should be viewed as seriously as physical threats.
- There was regular acknowledgement that being in the police is traditionally seen as a calling or vocation, and many participants accept that it carries a higher cost. However, the view police have to endure significant personal and public sacrifice is changing, and this may be one reason why many officers/staff see working for the police as a stepping stone in a longer-term career path beyond the police.

Recommendations

- Greater clarity and guidance are needed for officers/staff in relation to reporting threats and risks occurring in their private online life.
- Threats and risks occurring in personal online use should be re-framed from being based in professional standards to being based in support and well-being.
- Broader psychological support for officers/staff is needed, with an active shift in culture to view psychological assistance as 'normal' as physical support.
- Acceptance within the organisation is needed that the internet is now intertwined with most aspects of daily physical life, and it is no longer realistic to expect online passivity from officers/staff.
- New guidelines are needed for younger officers/staff who have grown up with their entire adolescence in the online world, and broader consideration of what this might mean for specialist roles in the future.

