



Managerial Officers

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Aim

The digital age opens up a new set of risks and challenges for police professionals. Online engagement, such as through social media platforms, further increases the visibility of police personnel within and without the communities in which they operate. This greater visibility potentially exposes them to higher levels of online targeting and abuse. Yet, there is little research investigating the online experiences of police officers and staff or strategies to protect them from online harms. Therefore, this study aims to understand the negative online experiences of police personnel and the organisational and managerial strategies deployed to mitigate and prevent exposure to online risks and harms among police officers and staff.

Key Findings

Interviews conducted with 50 police managers, combined with an analysis of 46 policy and social media guidance documents and training materials, highlighted the primacy of preserving public confidence, trust and legitimacy in organisational approaches to online risks and officer safety. Emphasis on misconduct and individual responsibility for online personal security informs an organisational culture which evolves around self-regulation and the policing of peers' online behaviours. Whilst line managers are often flagged as the first line of support for officers, we found that the focus on online harms among managers varied in relation to job roles, team composition and personal experiences of online harms. Line managers generally agree that their responsibilities over officers' and staff's online safety constitute signposting them to appropriate resources and support services and engaging in administrative processes relating to misconduct investigations. Opinions varied as to whether the provision of emotional and social support to officers and staff fell within line managers' scope of responsibilities. Training and development of police managers to handle online risks and harms is limited. As such, in their management of online harms, police managers tended to mobilise the skills they developed for dealing with offline harms, rather than conceptualise the online context as new and differentiated. A similar undifferentiated approach is adopted in the provision of wellbeing support services, with limited emphasis placed on online risks and harms.

Recommendations: Policy Level

National-level advocacy for tackling online harms

The notion of online risks and harms, and police personnel's need for protection, is a relatively novel issue evading the attention of police services in England and Wales. On the national level, raising awareness of policing personnel's online harms landscape is necessary, in order to ensure that more resources such as training and wellbeing support services are channelled towards supporting officers and staff who have experienced online victimisation.

Policy shifts towards a lens of care

Policy and guidance documents can be reframed to emphasise officer wellbeing as key to staying safe online, de-emphasising misconduct and organisational reputation as key motivators for security behaviours. This can have the impact of shifting organisational messaging towards one of awareness raising of online harms and risks, and encouraging employees to seek wellbeing support for harms experienced online. An organisational emphasis on wellbeing and care can contribute to a more engaged, committed and holistically healthy policing workforce providing more effective services for citizens.

Invisibility of officers' online risks and harms

It's not been something that's really played out in the national media either in terms of like a police officer being stalked, or you know, a police officer suffered harassment because [...] When it's not brought to your attention, it's not something that really springs to mind.

(Tigger, Inspector)

Recommendations: Organisational level

Develop an organisational culture underpinned by an ethics of care

Police leaders can incorporate an ethics of care in their management of online harms. Senior leaders can champion a duty of care to shift organisational culture towards the prioritisation of wellbeing in online harms management.

Integrate online harms management into leadership training

To inform a more consistent understanding of responsibilities for, and approaches towards, protecting officers and staff from online harms, it is necessary to integrate knowledge and technical skills training into leadership courses for managerial officers.

Promote cross-organisation collaborations in harms management

Increase collaborations between the Health and Wellbeing and other teams/units/divisions in the management of officers' and staffs' online harms to achieve more holistic wellbeing provision.

Channelling more resources to wellbeing support services

To ensure that wellbeing services can extend into support for online harms, an investment of more human and financial resources is integral.

