

Chapter Four – Analysis of results

This chapter presents and analyses the findings from three semi-structured interviews conducted with a Police Constable (PC), a Police Sergeant (PS) and a Police Inspector (PI) to explore the perceived impact that austerity measures has had on police officer wellbeing. This analysis addresses the following research objectives:

- Objective 2: To review police officers perceived mental and physical wellbeing in the post- austerity era and what measures are currently in place to promote wellbeing within policing.
- Objective 3 – To analyse police officers perceived morale and job satisfaction and how they have been impacted by austerity.

The data in this chapter has been analysed thematically and the findings are cross referenced with the relevant existing literature.

4.1 Mental and physical wellbeing post-austerity

All three participants highlighted a significant increase in workload and demand following the implementation of austerity measures. The PC noted:

“Before 2010, there was a PC for every single ward. It was rare that we would have to attend calls in other areas. We are now constantly asked to take emergencies and even routine logs in other areas to cover shortfall”.

This sentiment was reciprocated by the PS who noted that increasing pressure on officers to drive down logs and meet the ever-growing demand on the service was

resulting in insurmountable workloads, putting both PC's and their supervisors under significant stress:

“When I took over my shift, I had to oversee over 250 investigations between 7 police officers. Officers were telling me that they were completing work at home on their rest days just to keep them from drowning in their workload”.

The PI echoed the PC's observation that officers are now expected to take calls from areas all across the force. Which is in stark contrast to their experiences prior to the reduction in frontline work force pre-austerity:

“You wouldn't know officers from other patches. It was a rarity that you would take an emergency shout from a different area, as each area was well resourced and had enough officers to cope with their individual demand”.

Existing literature in this area supports the perception that lack of control of over workload and work-life balance conflicts are significant stressors for police officers (Collins & Gibbs, 2003; Jackman et al., 2020).

4.2 Welfare support

All three participants perceived an increase in available resources for officers to manage their wellbeing, however perceptions on how effective and adequate the resources are differed through ranks. The PC noted:

“I don't think the force really knows how to deal with it. They will spend a lot of money on handouts about how they care about our wellbeing, but that money could be better spent on councillors”.

The PC also perceived that most wellbeing initiatives were more geared towards making sure that officers' wellbeing was looked after just enough so that they could come into work rather than being a genuine concern for their welfare.

The PS perceived that wellbeing support and resources for officers had improved over the years however he did not feel that wellbeing was an issue that is given much concern by those of higher ranks.

"From Inspector down to PC, there is more emphasis on officer wellbeing, but I don't think that many officers above Chief Inspector are as concerned as their priority is the organisation rather than individual officers".

The PI echoed the sentiments of the PC in regard to their role and responsibility when it comes to officer welfare:

"My goal is to keep the officer happy so that they want to run through a brick wall for you and think I'm not feeling 100% but I'm not going to go sick, I'm going to come into work".

The PI also observed that there was little in the way of set guidance for supervisors on how to deal with officer's wellbeing:

"Sometimes it depends on who you've got as a supervisor for what level of welfare you will receive, and that shouldn't be the case. There should be some kind of guidance on how to look after an officer".

Current research in this area indicates that national initiatives such as Oscar Kilo and the National Wellbeing Service are driving the wellbeing agenda forward (Phythian et al., 2022) and whilst progress has been made, there remains a necessity for further development.

4.3 Declining morale and Job satisfaction

The current perception of morale and job satisfaction was a theme that was omnipresent throughout each participant interview. The PC described the erosion of public support and confidence and the immense societal and media pressures on officers as a significant factor contributing towards low morale and job satisfaction:

“We could do ten things right and one thing wrong and we’ll know about the one thing wrong especially in the media. I take that criticism to heart; it feels like a personal attack”.

This aligns with existing research which indicates that political and media pressure are significant stressors for officers (Nisar et al., 2018)

From a broader organisational perspective, the PI noted that the perception from the public is that the police are doing a worse job now than historically:

“I think there’s a perception from the public that were doing a worse job, and that absolutely comes from visibility”.

These findings mirror the wider research in this area which finds that visibility has a profoundly positive impact on public confidence in policing (Sindall, Sturgis, 2013; Bradford et al, 2009; Yesberg et al, 2023).

The PS described a general sense of negativity within teams:

“Officers are overworked and stressed. Most of them want to get off the frontline as soon as possible”.

Both the PC and the PS also highlighted that the assumption of responsibility for certain health and social calls has resulted in an erosion in officers job satisfaction. The wider research supports this perception with Laub's (2024) research suggesting that in the wake of cuts to other public services, police officers have supplemented other struggling institutions. Role ambiguity and conflict contribute to officer's stress levels (Frank et al., 2017; Santa Maria et al., 2018).

4.3 A changing workforce

A key issue raised by all three participants was the impact that the voluntary redundancy scheme has had on the experience level of the workforce resulting in a loss of a significant number of experienced officers. The PI explained:

"We lost a lot of experience very quickly with voluntary redundancy. We now have a very young and inexperienced workforce".

The PS also described how the loss of experienced officers has resulting in a very young workforce:

"We now have a very young workforce with very little experienced officers working on the frontline to pass down valuable policing knowledge".

The PC also commented on the challenges of working with a younger, less experienced workforce.

"The younger in-service officers are being tutored by officer with only 2-3 years' experience themselves, and they are already burnt out from the workload and stress".

This theme reflects the research undertaken by Elliot-Davies & Houdmont (2020) which found that the exodus of experienced officers during austerity has led to an over-reliance on a young inexperienced workforce. Research by Dando (2008) also found that inexperienced frontline officers perceive themselves as in adequately trained.

4.4 Summary of findings:

The findings emphasise three overarching themes: The significant strain that austerity has placed on officer wellbeing, the decline in job satisfaction and morale and the challenges associated with a changing workforce.

Participants consistently reported that increased workloads, reduced staffing and inadequate wellbeing support have negatively impacted officers' wellbeing and morale. Each participant also perceived that increased media, and public scrutiny has resulted in a degradation in morale.

A compelling consequence of austerity has been the loss of experienced officers through voluntary redundancy schemes, leaving forces with a younger workforce which requires more supervision and is perceived as less resilient and more likely to leave the force. The changing workforce has further strained resources and contributed to a decline in morale and job satisfaction.