

Research Methodology

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This study aims to contribute to broader research on mental health within policing by analysing how effectively officers are supported in returning to work after periods of stress or mental health-related leave.

By analysing officer perceptions of existing return-to-work (RTW) processes, the research aims to investigate the effectiveness of current RTW policies, identify areas for improvements, and consider whether shortcomings in RTW support contribute to additional periods of leave.

This research responds to growing concerns in literature and practice over police officers' mental health (Bell, Palmer-Conn and Kealey, 2021). Despite policing initiatives like Oscar Kilo and an increased understanding of mental health in wider society (Kelloway, Dimoff, and Gilbert, 2022), recent data suggests that officer mental health is deteriorating (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2024). Cartwright and Roach (2020) found that 39% of officers who took mental health-related leave went on to have further absences. However, the RTW process and its effectiveness remain underexplored.

3.1 Research Strategy

There is no singular definition of "research," but it is broadly understood as the process of developing knowledge within a particular field (Collis and Hussey, 2014). Denicolo (2013) argues that definitions of research are inherently variable, shaped by the project and the researchers themselves.

This study will employ a primary, exploratory research approach to investigate how police officers experience the RTW process. Exploratory research is particularly suitable when a topic is underexplored, as it allows the researcher to investigate potential relationships between variables (Saunders et al., 2019). This approach can serve as a foundation for future investigations or support the development of improved policies (Collis and Hussey, 2014).

The chosen method for this primary research is an anonymous online survey, which will incorporate closed and open-ended questions. Primary research refers to the collection of original data for a specific investigative purpose, which enables direct engagement with participants' lived experiences. In comparison, secondary research relies on existing materials to develop findings (Bryman, 2016). While secondary sources have been used to provide context and justify the relevance of this study, primary research will offer insight into the effectiveness of RTW procedures.

Due to the sensitive nature of mental health and the recognised stigma within policing (Bell and Eski, 2016), an online survey is the most appropriate method for this research. The anonymous and self-administrative format will allow participants to express their views openly and without fear of stigma or professional repercussions. This approach increases the likelihood of obtaining honest and reflective responses that might be difficult to obtain in interviews or group settings (Kang and Hwang, 2023).

To encourage participation and uphold research ethics, officers must provide voluntary, informed consent before taking part. A clear explanation of the study's aims, how responses will be used, and the participant's right to withdraw at any point will be included in the survey. No identifying information will be collected, and data will be stored in password-protected files and on password-protected devices.

3.2 Data collection

Data will be collected via an anonymous Google Survey, which will be distributed via The Beat, Gwent Police's internal communications platform. A combination of both closed-ended (multiple-choice) and open-ended questions will be used to collect quantitative and qualitative data in a mixed-methods approach. A mixed-methods approach enables researchers to gain a more effective understanding of the research question (Creswell, 2014) and deliver a more comprehensive analysis (George, 2021). This will support the research's exploratory aim by offering data patterns as well as more detailed, personal responses.

This study will use a purposive, voluntary sampling approach. Purposive sampling is suitable because it allows the researcher to select participants whose experiences are directly relevant (Nikolopoulou, 2022). The survey will include clear inclusion criteria to ensure that only officers who have taken stress or mental health-related leave within the past five years are eligible to participate.

An ideal sample would include at least 30 participants with diversity in terms of rank, age, gender, ethnicity, and shift location, although all participants will be from Gwent Police.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data — such as whether officers experienced repeat absences or had formal RTW plans in place — will be analysed using basic descriptive statistics. This method will help to identify how common certain experiences are and may reveal patterns or associations between RTW processes and outcomes (Bhandari, 2020).

Qualitative data, such as the open-text responses, will be analysed using inductive thematic analysis. This approach will allow themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than being guided by a predetermined framework (Caulfield, 2019). Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model for thematic analysis, responses will be coded and

grouped into themes to explore shared experiences and perceptions of the RTW process.

3.4 Limitations and Potential Problems

This study will have limitations, some inherent to qualitative and mixed-methods research and others specific to this study. Like most exploratory research, the goal is transferability rather than generalisability (Drisko, 2024), offering insights that could be applied to other policing contexts. Although this research has limitations, acknowledging them enhances the study's transparency and credibility (Collis and Hussey, 2014).

The use of the voluntary sampling method risks self-selection bias, as officers with particularly strong or negative experiences may be more likely to participate. In addition, distribution through The Beat restricts participation to officers within Gwent Police, limiting organisational diversity and potentially underrepresenting certain demographics.

Moreover, while purposive sampling will ensure participants have direct experience of the RTW process, it may limit sample size. Combined with the voluntary nature of participation and time constraints, this may impact the number of responses received. As a result, findings will be treated as indicative rather than representative.

The use of online surveys will limit the researcher's ability to clarify or adequately explore participant responses. This may limit the qualitative depth and the researcher's

ability to fully interpret meaning. Additionally, the framing of survey questions and subsequent thematic analysis may be shaped by the researcher's assumptions. Researcher influence will be mitigated via the anonymous, self-administrative structure. However, subtle bias in coding and interpretation remains a recognised risk (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

The topic may be triggering for participants with lived experience of mental health-related absence. To mitigate this, the survey will include a trigger warning, allow participants to skip any questions, and offer the right to withdraw at any stage.

3.5 Summary

This study will use an anonymous survey to analyse how police officers experience the RTW process following mental health-related leave. Data will be collected from purposively sampled participants within Gwent Police and analysed through descriptive statistics and inductive thematic analysis. The risk of self-selection bias and a limited sample size are among the limitations which have been addressed to validate the research's credibility.

Word count: 1,098 words

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