

Learning environments can protect against burnout for RASSO investigators



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Dr Arun Sondhi from the Centre for Policing Research and Learning - Open University has been working on the wellbeing surveys sent to officers as part of Operation Bluestone-Soteria.

A learning environment with formalised training as well as informal support can help mitigate the likelihood of RASSO officers becoming burnt out, academics have found.

Academics from the Centre for Policing Research and Learning at the Open University have been working on wellbeing surveys for RASSO officers through Operation Bluestone-Soteria.

This comprises three surveys in total; one initially for the pathfinder forces of the programme, a second for the expansion forces, and now a final survey is ongoing across 35 forces nationwide following national adoption.

Forces who took part in the initial surveys are still asked to take part in the ongoing final one with hopes that some comparisons may be evidenced as the programme has progressed (although it won't necessarily be the same individuals completing the survey again).

The survey encompasses officer health, well-being, attitudes towards victims and perceptions of the learning environment – it has remained broadly the same across each of the iterations with only minor tweaks.

Dr Arun Sondhi explained to Police Oracle that the surveys have consistently found “high levels of stress and ill-health” among investigators.

“We have a measure on burnout symptoms and we're finding comparable levels of burnout symptoms to those of frontline medics during the COVID pandemic period.”

Inferences have been drawn by comparing the survey results with those of the NHS staff survey.

Survey data showed that 62% RASSO investigators reported to have felt unwell in the last year due to work-related stress. It compares to 44.8% of NHS staff during the 2022 survey.

63.4% RASSO investigators came to work in the last three months despite being unwell, compared with 56.6% NHS staff.

However, the pressure from managers to come to work despite being unwell was lower for RASSO investigators (14.1%) than for NHS staff (22.6%).

96% RASSO investigators said they put themselves under pressure to come to work despite being unwell.

Dr Sondhi, who comes from a Public Health background, added: “A lot of the officers that we work with are relatively young. The average age seems to be about 39. I think this has long term consequences. If you have this degree of intense ill health, there's something down the line.”

One conclusion that is emerging through the research however is that the learning environment can be a 'protective factor' reducing burnout.

Academics have scaled burnout progression into five stages – starting with ‘engaged’ through to ‘ineffective’ and ‘overextended’.

Around one in 10 are at the end of this scale and ‘disengaged’ or at burn out.

The learning environment does not just encompass formal training mechanisms like qualifications and accreditation, but further support from colleagues and supervisors of learning on the job, getting questions answered, and other informal support mechanisms.

“The way people feel the organisation looks after them to do the job helps reduce burnout.

“We think that’s quite profound, because it gives you a sense of what you could put into place to help reduce the symptoms of burnout.”

Previous qualitative research ‘Stress-related psychosocial risk factors among police officers working on Rape and Serious Sexual offences’ published in *Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles* and authored by Linda Maguire and Arun Sondhi heard from officers who presented the same ideas.

One said: ‘I don’t feel comfortable, having been on a better resourced [non-specialist] team, that we’ve got the right staff, the right numbers. And the job itself doesn’t distinguish between an experienced investigator and a brand new one that’s come indirect and all the extra training they need.’

Another: ‘It is a very difficult place and there is no outlet. You either go off sick and protect yourself and potentially affect others or you try and work your way through it. There are no quick fixes. There’s all these welfare champions and things like that that is all well and good on paper, but they don’t offer any solutions.’

The final wellbeing survey for RASSO investigators can be completed [here](#) before the deadline of April 15 2024.