

Understanding individual differences in police attitudes about violence and decision making

Examining how individual factors can predict attitudes about violence and decision making in policing.

Key details

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Police region	West Midlands
Level of research	PhD
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Research context

This research looks at individual factors, such as officer and suspect demographics, behaviour, personality traits, adverse childhood experiences, and values. It aims to examine the extent to which these individual factors best predict attitudes about both:

- violence (for example, rape and sexual assault, racial discrimination, violent ideation)
- decision making (that is, use of force acceptability and reporting)

This will help increase our understanding on the factors driving officers' attitudes and decision making.

This can be used to assist UK police forces when exploring avenues for improvement in police practice and officer wellbeing by identifying the relevance of known risk factors for violent ideation.

Presently, research has largely not been based on theory. There is a lack of understanding of which psychological factors (for example, dark personality traits) are associated with different types of violence attitudes and behaviour among serving police officers.

Some psychological factors and theoretical frameworks that warrant exploration are:

- dark personality traits (for example dark tetrad, machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, sadism and psychological entitlement)
- moral disengagement (the cognitive processes individuals adopt to overcome their moral self-sanctions to commit harm)
- intrasexual competition (competition between same-sex rivals for resources such as social status, where competition or violence may be related to suspect physical attractiveness and dominance)

All of these have been associated with police culture, violent attitudes and perpetration within the general population (Papazoglou and others, 2019; Tetreault and others, 2018; Jonason, 2015; Jonason and others, 2017; Soares and others, 2018; Navas and others, 2012; Fido and others, 2019; Hunter and others, 2010).

Aims

The overarching aims of this research are to examine:

1. the extent to which violent attitudes are endorsed by police officers
2. which psychological and individual factors best predict violent attitudes and behaviour
3. which theoretical framework best explains violent ideation
4. how situational factors influence officers' acceptability of use of force and reporting behaviour

The research will benefit UK police forces and the communities they serve by contributing to the understanding of the factors that best explain officers' attitudes towards violence and decision making (use of force acceptability and reporting). The findings will assist police forces when exploring avenues for improvement in police practice and officer wellbeing by identifying the relevance on known risk factors for violent ideation. These avenues include enhancing officer training to address factors that facilitate harmful attitudes and impair operational decision making.

The long-term aim of this research is to provide evidence-based solutions for UK police departments on ways to develop screening and recruitment procedures and officer training. This will improve job performance and officers' mental wellbeing, as well as building overall public trust and engagement towards police with the hope of improving crime reporting and victim rapport.

This research can provide multiple avenues for improvement within a range of high-agenda violence-related areas. For example, violence against women and girls, racial discrimination, and use of force. All these provide a more comprehensive insight into risk factors for violent ideation within policing.

The project is novel in its focus not only on current demographic and police data, but also psychological variables not previously considered (moral values, competition, and personality traits). This will provide police forces with access to unique data that can be used to inform their practice.

Research methodology

The research will employ a cross-sectional design.

Depending on each force's preferred method of recruitment, participants will either be sent an online link to the study via their working email or given a paper copy of the study.

If a participant agrees to participate, they will be presented with an information leaflet outlining the research and they will be asked to give their consent. After seven days they will then be sent an online link to the study.

During consent, officers will be asked to provide their work email address. This will be used to send a direct link to the study. The reason for the delay between giving consent and completing the study is to give officers time to consider their participation. This is due to the sensitivity of the research and to reassure officers that their personal data (work email address, name, and collar number – with the latter two only being collected for consent purposes) will be kept separate and confidential from their research data.

Participants who have consented will then be sent the study link or questionnaire. Here they will be asked to complete nine short validated psychometric measures assessing:

- personality traits
- adverse childhood experiences (for example, peer bullying, sibling aggression and parental mistreatment)
- moral values
- attitudes towards the violent ideations (such as fantasies, daydreams) held by others
- attitudes towards rape and sexual assault
- attitudes towards racial discrimination and stereotypes
- attitudes towards support for use of force during civilian interactions
- self-reported use of force over the last 12 months
- acceptance of use of force in response to a written scenario depicting an encounter between an officer and a suspect

It is estimated that the survey will take 15 to 20 minutes to complete. The project has received ethical approval from the University of Warwick's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC).

Research participation

This research will be a multisite study involving officers recruited from police forces across England and Wales. The project has received chief officer approval from West Mercia Police (where the researcher has previous research and voluntary experience as a cadet), where data are currently being collected.

Several other forces have expressed a keen interest in taking part, where the research request is undergoing review. The aim is to obtain a sample of 551 officers. If a force or department is interested in taking part and consents to participating in the research, senior gatekeepers will be asked to advertise and distribute the consent link to officers. This has previously been done via newsletters, staff intranet and mailing lists.

If you are in a police force in England and Wales and are interested in participating, please contact the researcher at rebecca.plimmer@warwick.ac.uk. You can also [see the participant information sheet](#) for more information.