

# Policewomen's Experiences of Working during Lockdown: Results of a Survey with Officers from England and Wales

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**Abstract** Policing is a high-stress occupation requiring emotional management when facing job-related violence, threats to safety and well-being, work-life disruption, and unpredictable hours. A national health pandemic coupled with public order and restraint imperatives has compounded the levels of stress in policing. In the UK, new working patterns have been negotiated to manage the constraints of a different working environment during COVID-19. Using a self-administered survey, this article explores the experiences of 473 female police officers working during the first lockdown in 2020. The article shows that the COVID-19 preventative measures forced police services to navigate new and varied working patterns for their employees. Previous resistance to flexible working practices in policing was put aside as police services sought to manage the virus in its own ranks as well as policing the public. Preliminary findings suggest that officers working from home were more likely to feel satisfied with management responses compared with those working on the front line, although negative attitudes from colleagues and management towards those working from home were present. Those not working from home reported higher levels of stress related to their Force's lack of communication with them about their welfare.

## Introduction

Physical and emotional exhaustion, violent confrontation, and long hours are formally recognized as detrimental to police officers' well-being (Lieberman *et al.*, 2002; Houdmont and Elliott-Davies, 2016; Elliott-Davis, 2018). Organizational stressors in their many forms also carry a stress load for many police officers. These findings are well established (Purba and Demou 2019) and are relevant across a number of countries and jurisdictions (van der Lippe and Lippenyi, 2018). As

police officers in the UK seek to manage and police COVID-19, organizational stressors are exacerbated as officers continue to work in shifts, frustrated by cancelled rest days and worry about the proximity of the virus and its potential impact on themselves and their families (Apter, 2020).

As the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths continued to rise in the UK, a national lockdown was announced of many workplaces from mid-March 2020 only easing slightly 3 months later in June. The lockdown has contributed to new

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patterns of work across a number of sectors as businesses and households seek to mitigate the spread of the disease by social distancing, use of personal protection equipment (PPE) and working from home. Various disciplines have begun to appraise the consequences, harms, and benefits of new ways of working (Jones *et al.*, 2020; Akkermans *et al.*, 2020; Alipour *et al.*, 2020; Burk *et al.*, 2020). Azcona *et al.* (2020) report the results of an international survey indicating that COVID-19 preventative measures are increasing women's responsibility for the bulk of work to keep households going (i.e. household chores, care of children and family). Findings for the UK were mid-way in an 18 country comparisons with 17% of women strongly agreeing they have taken on a lot more of these responsibilities. Lungumbu and Butterly (2020) argue that the increased care burdens risk a return to stereotypic divisions of labour with the consequence of setting back women's work equality gains.

The focus of this article is policewomen's work experiences of COVID-19 preventive measures particularly the impacts of working from home or remaining at their places of work. The police service has had a rather ambivalent attitude towards flexible working (Dick and Hyde, 2006) with those seeking these arrangements previously often facing hostility, lacking support from managers and co-workers.

There have been a few speculative papers from the perspective of police working in crisis (Papazoglou *et al.*, 2020), the probable impact on police services of the current pandemic (Kniffin *et al.*, 2021; Drew and Martin, 2020; Mehdizadeh and Kamkar, 2020) and perceptions of workload impacts (Sadiq, 2020). Others have sought to consider the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of previous disasters and public health emergencies, either by systematic review (Laufs and Waseem, 2020) or by suggesting the possible implications for police resilience and stress (Stogner *et al.*, 2020). To date, Frenkel *et al.* (2021) represents one

of the few published empirical papers monitoring the impact on police officers of working under conditions of COVID-19. This study adds to this embryonic literature.

## Methods

### Questionnaire survey

An online questionnaire survey method was employed. Both police staff and police officers were approached to take part in the study and this article reports on the experiences of the latter. The broad remit of the survey was to investigate views and experiences of working during the first COVID-19 lockdown. The study was particularly interested in the shift (if any) in working patterns, the impact of that shift and to examine the relationship between police officers and their line managers/supervisors and, more broadly with the force itself. The survey identified three different ways of working in policing at this time. Those working from home, those partially working from home and those who were not working from home, that is remaining at their police premises. In addition to the quantitative elements of the questionnaire which asked about pre-COVID patterns of working and domestic life with comparable questions relating to the lockdown period, participants were asked to respond to two open questions:

Please can you briefly describe any new ways of working that were initiated during lockdown that you think are worth keeping in the post COVID recovery?

Are there any other comments you would like to make about your working life during the pandemic?

Qualitative comments used in this article have been drawn from the responses to these questions.

**Table 1:** Occupational details by location of work during lockdown

Policing role	Home working, n (%)	Partial home working, n (%)	Not working from home, n (%)	Chi-square
Investigation	30 (19)	81 (53)	169 (28)	50.7***
Neighbourhood	13 (19)	16 (24)	38 (57)	6.8**
Response	9 (9)	10 (10)	77 (80)	39.5***
Custody and detention	4 (27)	0 (0)	11 (73)	6.0*
Support	21 (36)	20 (34)	29 (17)	6.7**

\* $P < 0.5$ ,

\*\* $P < 0.03$ ,

\*\*\* $P < 0.0001$ .

### Sample demographics and occupational characteristics

The survey respondents were a generally older group whose average age is around 40 years and with an average length of service of 14.8 years. Most identified as White British (91%), and many were married or living with a partner (76%), and over 50% of these couples were partnered with another police officer. Sixty per cent had children with most being of school age (57%). A significant number of the respondents also had other caring responsibilities, in the main, elderly parents and/or vulnerable individuals living elsewhere (59%). Officers were dispersed between Metropolitan (13%), Provincial (47%), and other (39%) types of forces. The majority of the survey respondents gave their rank as Constables (70%). Sergeants constituted 18% and Inspector and higher ranks, 12%. Our sample mainly served in investigation: 38%, response: 25%, neighbourhood policing: 18%, support functions: 15%, and custody and detention: 4%.

### Procedure

An anonymous online survey powered by Qualtrics was distributed during August 2020 to a randomly selected pilot sample of 2,000 officers for the authors by the Police Federation of England and Wales. In the event, through a miscommunication, the invitation to participate implied that responses were required from women

officers, and only 18 of the 491 respondents were men yielding a 24% response rate in all. Given the small number of male participants, this article presents the results for the 473 women returning completed, usable questionnaires. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Southampton’s Ethic Committee.

## Results

### Demographic and occupation details of those working from home compared with those remaining in their work places

In terms of our research focus on work location, 23% were working at home during the lockdown, 32% were partially working from home, and 45% remained on the front line. There were no statistically significant differences in marital status and ethnicity by location of working. Those working from home tended to be older (mean age 44 years) compared with those partially working from home (mean age 40 years) and those not working from home (mean age 38 years) (ANOVA 14.3  $P < 0.0001$ ). The average number of children looked after at home was statistically significantly different (home workers, 1.18; partial home workers, 1.22 and frontline officers, 0.93 (ANOVA 3.1,  $P < 0.04$ ). The ages of the children at home were only statistically significantly different in the age bracket 13–18 years with 24% of home workers,

21% of partial home workers, and 16% of front-line officers having children of these ages at home (chi square 125.14  $P < 0.0001$ ). In all, 42% of the respondents had care responsibilities for an ageing parent and 22% for a vulnerable person/relative. There were no statistically significant differences by work location.

Type of force showed no statistically significant differences in officers' work location during lockdown. There were statistically significant differences in role between home-working and non-home-working officers, with response officers the least likely to be working from home and those in support roles the most likely (see [Table 1](#) for details). Most officers worked shifts, 70%, with those assigned home working the least likely to (12%) (chi square 84.7  $P < 0.0001$ ). Rank did not statistically significantly differentiate between locations of lockdown working. Three quarters (74%) worked full time, 21% worked part time, and less than 5% identified themselves as working flexibly. Location of work was not statistically significantly different in terms of employment status or rank.

### Work and domestic patterns prior to lockdown

Prior to lockdown relatively few officers were able to work from home with 19% (85) saying this happened occasionally, and only three respondents saying this happened 'most' or 'all of the time'.

Considering partnered police officers with children at home, 62% of women officer respondents said they were mainly responsible for domestic chores, this being shared by 36%. There was a more even division of responsibility for children with 49% saying they were the main carers and 49% saying this was equally shared.

Prior to lockdown, it was also relatively unusual for police officers to participate in virtual meetings (9%), webinars (8%), or use social media for communicating with the public (18%). Officers were very positive about their superiors with 81%

strongly agreeing or agreeing they were supported, 89% that they were trusted, and 79% that they were communicated with frequently.

### Work and domestic patterns during lockdown

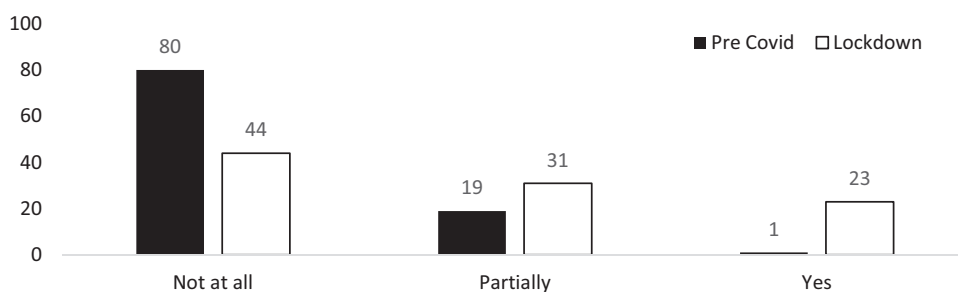
Compared with previously, the pattern of home working changed significantly in the lockdown period (chi-squared 144.4,  $P < 0.000$ ) (see [Figure 1](#) for details).

Looking just at partnered officers with children, there was a statistically significant change in caring commitments (chi-squared 10.3,  $P < 0.005$ ) with 53% of women officers taking the main responsibility (compared with 49% previously). In lockdown, only 38% said this responsibility was equally shared (compared with 49% previously). Undertaking household chores remained the same in lockdown as previously for these officers, with 62% saying they did so earlier with the same percentages saying they continued to do so during the lockdown, not a statistically significant difference.

Overall, respondents felt working from home was a positive arrangement, citing renewed energy, and concentration levels:

I work very hard and am very task oriented and working from home has made me more efficient, able to spend time developing my skills, spend time reading force operations, more aware of everything I would normally ignore and get my head down at police station. [Home working, partnered sergeant working in a support function having 22 years of service]

Working from home enabled me to stay calmer, I had more energy at the end of my working day. [Home working partnered sergeant working in neighbourhood policing with 21 years of service]



**Figure 1:** Percentage able to work from home prior to and during lockdown.

Others saw the plus and minus sides of home working:

The flexibility provided by my line manager to enable working from home to work alongside childcare has been amazing and as much as working from home on occasions post pandemic would be ideal, I do not believe this should become a permanent arrangement just because it is deemed to have worked. Nothing can beat the interaction with others and constantly working from home can make a work/life balance less defined and give the feeling of being in work more than you actually are. Plus as a member of the training department I have now never met some of the students I monitor which is not good. [Home working partnered constable working in a support function with 20 years' service]

Yet others felt there were more negative aspects to working from home especially for those remaining on the frontline. Several felt colleagues either took advantage of the situation or they themselves were disadvantaged:

There was a lot of focus on staff working from home and how to keep their positivity up (such as asking people to submit cute photos of their

new “view from the office” (i.e. everyone working from home and in their gardens in the nice weather). There seemed to be no thought or consideration given to all of us who were still working on the front line and could not work from home—there was no recognition that for some of us work hasn't changed and that we were still expected to put ourselves at risk whilst other members of staff get to do their work in a flexible way whilst sitting in their own gardens. [Non home working partnered sergeant working as response officer with 17 years of service]

Officers either did the same job (59%) or were mostly able to do the same job during the lockdown as previously (24%), while 13% were asked to do a different job as a result of the lockdown. There was no statistical difference in terms of whether officers were working from home or not.

Overall, the relationship between the officer working at home or remaining at work with their line manager/supervisor as measured by the degree of supportiveness, trust, and communication was high although showed a slightly negative movement in frequency communication between pre- and post-lockdown but this was not statistically significant. There were no statistically significant differences in these ratings by respondents who

were home working, partially home working, or not working from home at all.

During the lockdown I have been fully supported by my Manager, however in the last month since my Manager left my unit for a new position within the force, I have not been contacted or spoken to directly by my new Manager. This is not too much of an issue as I feel trusted to manage my work and approach my new manager as and when I need to, which is very much appreciated. [Home working partnered officer working in Criminal Justice admin with 23 years' service]

My son is disabled ...my Supervisors and colleagues have been amazing supporting me and I am very grateful. [Working from home, partnered with 4 years of service working in a command team]

But there were some criticisms by the 1 in 10 officers who disagreed that they felt supported, trusted or communicated with during lockdown, as the following quote indicate:

My first line manager was supportive but I found that my second line manager would make comments during meetings to make me feel bad for working from home and every so often will contact HR to try to get me back to work against medical advice. [Home working, partnered constable working in neighbourhood policing with 10 years' service]

### Quality of working during lockdown

About a third of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their hours of work had increased during the lockdown with 42% disagreeing or

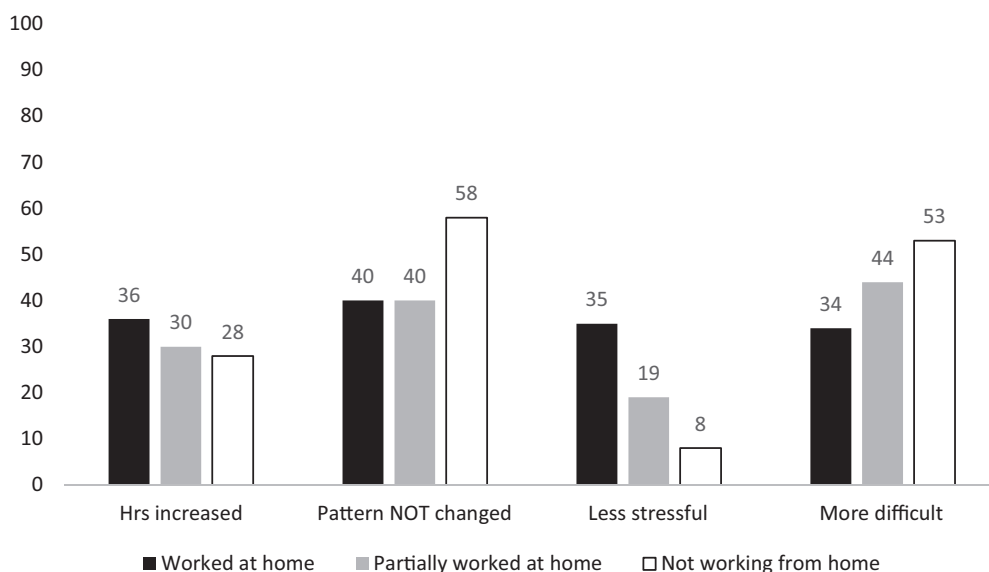
disagreeing strongly with that statement. There was no statistically significant difference between those working from home or those not working from home. Approximately half (47%) of all strongly agreed or agreed that their pattern of work had not changed, whereas 39% disagreed with this. Nearly half again (47%) agreed or strongly agreed that their work had become more difficult during the lockdown period. There were, however, some statistically significant differences between those who work from home, either completely or partially, and those remaining at the usual place of work, with respect to patterns of work, stress, and difficulties faced.

Those not working from home were the most likely to agree that their work was more difficult (chi-squared 17.7,  $P < 0.001$ ) or that their work pattern stayed much the same (chi-squared 35.5,  $P < 0.000$ ) (Figure 2). These respondents were also the least likely to agree that their work was less stressful (chi-squared 43.3,  $P < 0.000$ ). Notably, about a third of those working from home reported much less stress and did not feel they worked longer hours or that their work pattern had changed significantly or become more difficult.

Some of the qualitative responses to our question relating to working life under COVID-19 reflect these quantitative indicators:

It's been horrendous, dealing with Covid jobs on top of our normal daily basis. [Not working from home, partnered constable working in communications having 19 years of service]

The work of the Neighbourhood/Community department has been completely ignored and Response has taken priority. No appreciation for having to change roles and work on Response. As such, there is a huge build-up of work having to be done now we are back on Neighbourhood.



**Figure 2:** Percentage strongly agreeing/agreeing about quality of working either from home, partially at home or not working from home.

[Not working from home, partnered constable working in neighbourhood policing with 2 years of service]

There was a lot more mental health and risk to deal with in custody and it became a horrendous place to work, numerous sergeants going home crying. New legislation every day to work with and no time to actually stop read it properly. [not working from home, partnered sergeant working in Custody with 19 years of service]

My role doubled as I worked my child exploitation investigations and domestic violence. [Partially working from home, partnered detective constable working in specialist investigations with 7 years' service]

The survey asked whether the officer felt their contribution to their team was valued the same, less or more during the lockdown. Of those working from home, 24% said they felt less

valued by their team compared with 16% of those partially working from home and 8% of those not working from home (chi-squared 14.5,  $p=0.006$ ).

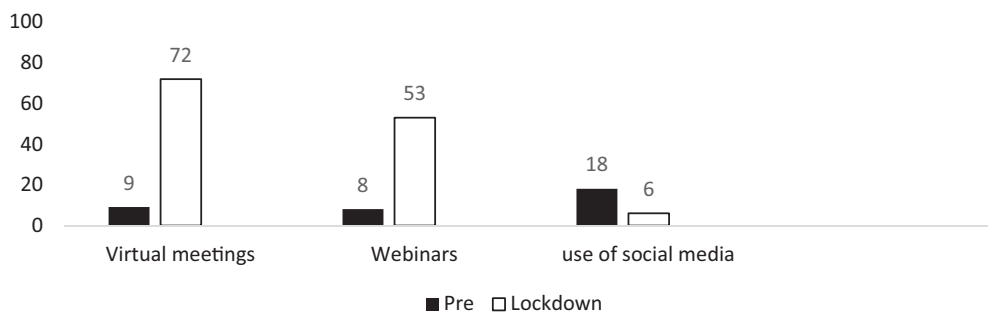
### Styles of working

The pattern of virtual meetings (chi-squared 364.4,  $P < 0.00001$ ), webinar use (chi squared 148.9,  $P < 0.0001$ ) and use of social media to communicate with the public (chi-squared 25.5,  $P < 0.0001$ ) changed (statistically significantly) during the lockdown (See [Figure 3](#) for details).

By and large, these innovations were welcomed:

Devolved work and levels of trust have increased significantly. As a woman, I have a much clearer voice round the virtual table, either by the use of comments panels on skype/MS Teams or by the 'raise the hand' flag on MS Teams. I cannot be so easily ignored, spoken over or have my points side-lined - this also leads to not being criticised for not





**Figure 3:** Changing patterns of working prior to and during lockdown.

**Table 2:** Percentage of those agreeing about prioritisation of home-based IT resources by work location

Whose work is prioritized	Access to Internet			Access to preferred working space			Access to preferred working times		
	Home working (%)	Partial home working (%)	Not working from home (%)	Home working (%)	Partial home working (%)	Not working from home (%)	Home working (%)	Partial home working (%)	Not working from home (%)
My work	39	25	8	39	27	8	36	28	10
Partner's work	5	4	22	11	10	29	5	5	22
Children	5	10	31	12	12	33	6	12	31
Equal	48	60	33	36	49	28	45	51	35
Chi-square	68.8, $P < 0.0001$			45.7, $P < 0.0001$			45.6, $P < 0.0001$		

contributing! (Not working from home, partnered chief officer working in a command team with 31 years of experience]

### Access to IT resources, provision of equipment, and/or extra training

There were three survey questions about the use of computers during the lockdown, that is who had access to the Internet, the preferred space for working at the computer, and choice of timing when to work. There were statistically significant differences between those working from home and those not working from home. By and large, those working from home (completely or partially) equally prioritized access within their households or prioritized their own work. Those not working from home also indicated an equal prioritization, but their own work was the least

likely to be prioritized compared with their partner (Table 2).

The survey asked all respondents whether their force had provided PPE and any additional IT resources and training. Just over half (56%) of those working from home were provided with additional IT equipment and about a third (35%) received additional training in its use. Such training was welcomed:

My force did really well at rolling out IT quickly. This has led to HUGE progress in remote working and working from home. (Working from home, partnered constable working in a support function with 2 years' service]

Others thought they were not so well served:

I need more training on IT and assistance from Comms department to



be able to create presentations and deliver via zoom which has not been forthcoming. [Partially working from home, partnered constable working in Roads policing with 28 years' service]

I had terrible problems with my internet. I live in a rural area and no fibre optic connection. Internet kept dropping out and this caused me a lot of stress. [Partially working from home, partnered, constable working in CID with 13 years of service]

Of those working away from home, approximately three-quarters of neighbourhood and response officers were issued with PPE (79%). Although these respondents and others did comment extensively that some of the PPE was slow in being delivered. Some examples included the following:

It would appear the organisation's standpoint when the lockdown first started was 'were the police it's business as usual'. I felt extremely undervalued by this opinion and no PPE was forthcoming for some weeks. It was as if we didn't matter at all. [Not working from home, partnered constable working in special investigations with 20 years' of service]

No one recognised that we were the front line - yes NHS had the intense pressure of saving very ill people, but their 'customers' generally wanted their help, and they had PPE up to the eyeballs. ... all we got was abuse, assaults and media criticism. We were expected to stop people spreading the virus - with no PPE, and being spat at. [Not working from home, single constable working in neighbourhood policing with 7 years' service]

PPE in custody non-existent at the start. No plastic screens or social distancing at all. [Not working from home partnered sergeant working in Custody with 22 years of service]

### Welfare and well-being

Two-thirds (67%) of all respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they felt *more tired* at the end of the day during the lockdown period. The same proportion (67%) said they felt *more stressed* during the lockdown compared with previously. Only about a fifth of respondents agreed/agreed strongly that they had more reserves of emotional energy during the lockdown, whilst over half (55%) disagreed/disagreed strongly and 24% remained neutral. Those working from home were less likely to report feeling tired and were less stressed than colleagues who were partially working from home or not working from home (Table 3).

The qualitative comments give a visceral dimension to how officers were feeling:

Harder now working from home 24/7 as it's become a work place and not the usual escape from work... If anything work has increased due to more meetings taking place online, and I think digital fatigue at the end of the day is beginning to show in people's attitudes in meetings. [Working from home constable in other designated role with 25 years' of service]

Because toddler was only going to nursery, if both myself and husband at work it was very tiring having to look after her every minute I wasn't at work. As there was nowhere to go and unable to go and see people it was exhausting stuck at home which made me more tired for work. Also

**Table 3:** Percentage suffering psychological and physical reactions to work during lockdown compared to previously

	Feeling more tired			Having more emotional energy			Feeling more stressed		
	Home working (%)	Partial home working (%)	Not working from home (%)	Home working (%)	Partial home working (%)	Not working from home (%)	Home working (%)	Partial home working (%)	Not working from home (%)
Agree	58	69	67	28	18	18	54	63	68
Neutral	13	17	18	25	26	22	19	17	16
Disagree	29	14	16	47	56	60	27	19	16
Chi-square	32.8, $P < 0.0001$			NS			32.1, $P < 0.0001$		

NS = non significant.

as we were in the house more, there was more house work and cooking etc to do at the same time as looking after toddler. [Not working from home, constable working on response with 12 years' of service]

Just over a third (37%) of all respondents said their forces had contacted them during the lockdown to ask about their personal welfare and 43% indicated their force had facilitated their staying in touch with colleagues. However, two-thirds were not satisfied about the level of force contact in relation to their welfare. Additionally, being generally more worried about their family (over two-thirds (60%) were worried about their families' safety), as exemplified by this comment:

At the beginning I seriously considered retiring early to be at home with my children and reduce the risk of my catching the disease and potentially leaving them without a mum [Partially working from home partnered constable working in specialist investigations with 28 years' experience]

### Assessment of forces' performance during lockdown

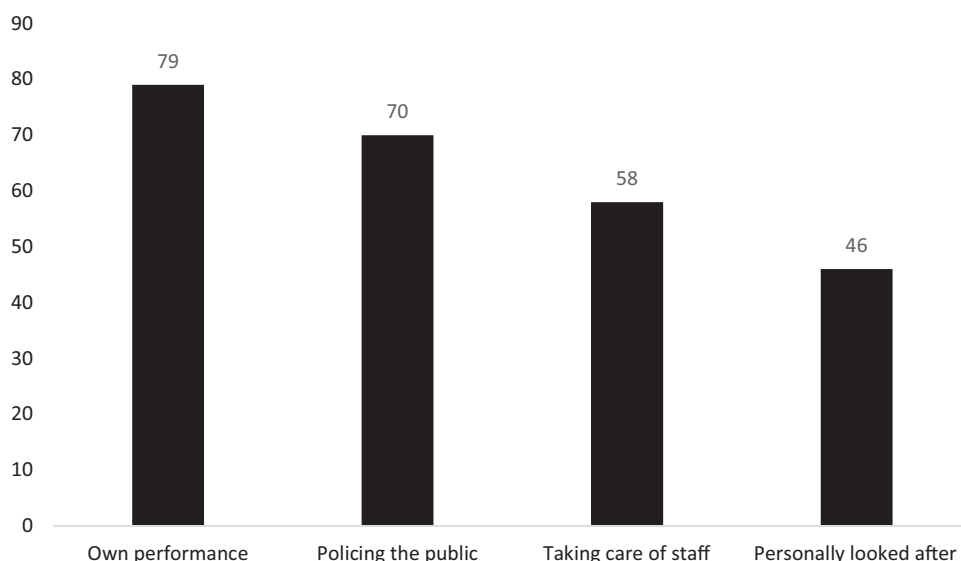
Earlier we reflected on the largely positive relationship between police officers and their direct supervisor/line managers. These findings were not

reciprocated when it came to looking at the force as a whole. Overall, all police officers were positive about the way their force had performed its work during the lockdown. They were also mostly positive about the way their forces had policed the public in the period. They were least satisfied with the way they had been looked after personally.

The percentages reporting that they felt personally looked after by their force was greatest amongst those working from home (60% were very or fairly satisfied compared with 54% partially working from home and 32% not working from home (Chi-squared 42.3,  $P < 0.0001$ )) (Figure 4). A similar pattern emerged from the experience of being contacted by their force enquiring about their welfare; 68% of home workers said this happened, compared with 43% of those partially working from home, and 24% not working from home (Chi-squared 49.1,  $P < 0.001$ ).

The adverse comments indicate where some of the explanations of these statistics lie:

... expected to work miracles with no guidance until too late and the public had already decided what they were doing. Changing goals posts, huge demand on less staff, mixed messages from SMT. [Not working from home partnered sergeant working in neighbourhood policing with 19 years of service]



**Figure 4:** Percentage of respondents' ratings of own and force's performances as very or fairly satisfactory.

Response officers were truly tested in this time, being told we had to police under legislation that had come in just hours before our shift, and not being given any training. We were sent to many, many calls from neighbours reporting each other for breaches that may have been true, but was a waste of time. [Not working from home single constable working on response with 2 years' experience]

### Post-COVID working

At the time of analysis, two-thirds of all the survey respondents had returned to their pre-COVID working pattern (65%). In the event of a further period of lockdown,<sup>1</sup> just over half (57%) thought it would be harder and 43% said they felt better prepared. One officer observed:

If a second lockdown happens I shall struggle as my ex is not helpful. I had

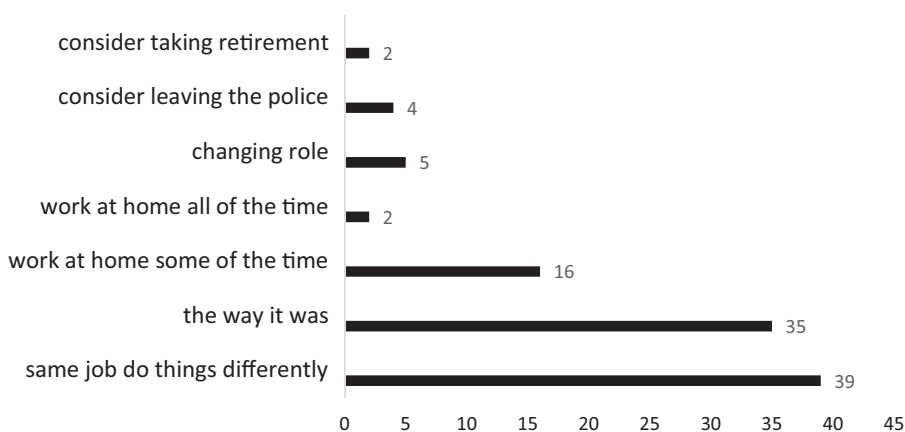
a lot of stress caused by him telling me I would be responsible if my children became ill. [Not working from home single parent constable working in neighbourhood policing with 19 years of service]

Those not working from home were the most likely to think a second lockdown would be harder (67% compared with 52% of those partially working from home and 47% of home workers (chi-squared 10.7,  $P < 0.005$ )).

At the end of COVID restrictions, 35% thought that things would return to the way things were. Figure 5 illustrates the percentage of those respondents who thought things might be different for them.

The pattern of preferences was somewhat different. Looking at the largest percentages of all the preferences expressed, 36% of those working from home wanted to continue to do so; 39% of the partially working from home officers wanted to do

<sup>1</sup> A second Lockdown was enforced by the UK government on 5 November. The observations in this article do not take this period into account.



**Figure 5:** Percentage expressing expectations following ending of all lockdown restrictions.

the same job but differently, while 46% of those not working from home wanted to retain their ways of working before COVID.

## Discussion

Laufs and Waseem's (2020) systematic review of policing in the pandemic suggested that, as yet, little empirical research was available documenting officer well-being. This article contributes to this omission. The one empirical paper that was located (Frenkel *et al.*, 2021) compared the experiences of officers from five European countries to find more women reported being stressed during the various lockdowns. The present research maps in more detail the experiences of women officers serving in England and Wales.

In summary, there were no differences between those working from home, partially working from home or not working from home in terms of the type of force the officer worked in, their rank, ethnicity, marital status, whether they worked full time, part time or flexi time. All were mostly able to do the same job as previously and all were positive about their immediate supervisors before or during lockdown. All agreed that their hours had increased and that they experienced a depletion of their emotional energies. There was no difference

in the pattern of undertaking domestic chores where two-thirds of the women officers took the main responsibility prior to, and during lockdown.

Where their experiences differed related to their policing role (more officers who worked in a support function were likely to work at home all of the time or partially, and conversely, response officers were the most likely not to be able to work from home and were also the most likely to work shifts). Home working was associated with less stress, and greater likelihood of being contacted by their force to enquire about their welfare. Home workers were the most satisfied with the way their force had personally looked after them. There was a change in child care where 53% of partnered officers with children took the main responsibility in lockdown compared with 49% previously. Eight 4% of the women officers said they took the main responsibility for home schooling.

Those not working from home were more likely to report their working lives as more difficult. Their work pattern remained much the same, and they reported being more stressed and tired and least likely to have been contacted by their about their welfare. These officers were the most dissatisfied about the way their forces had looked after them although were the most likely to aspire to

the same working patterns after the lockdown. Those working completely from home were the most likely to wish to retain this status after COVID, while those partially working from home were the most likely to want to do the same job as before but differently.

Overall the picture here is of a workforce working longer hours with its officers tired, emotionally depleted and suffering varying levels of stress. Those remaining at their places of work reported greater stress with those working from home by and large being less stressed. That policing is a highly stressed occupation is well documented (Lieberman *et al.*, 2002; Purba and Demou, 2019; van der Lippe and Lippenyi, 2018) in the academic literature. The Police Federation of England and Wales' annual Welfare, Demand and Capacity Surveys also continually report stress levels at over 35%<sup>2</sup> compared with the lower levels of approximately 15% in the general workforce (HSE, 2012). A recent survey commissioned by the College of Policing also suggests that fatigue, stress and low emotional energy result in 'lower than average levels of wellbeing in police officers' (Graham *et al.*, 2019, p. 1). All these observations made prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Understandably, like many workers, police in the UK have come under considerable pressure working through the pandemic (Apter, 2020). A total of 65% of our respondents said they felt more stressed in lockdown than previously. This article, however, is about the working conditions of police working through COVID in various ways rather than *how* police are policing the pandemic.

Part-time working, working from home, agile working and other forms of flexible working practices have long been on the agenda of policing services. In England and Wales while Forces have sought to recruit and retain high-quality staff and

manage diversity overall, the enthusiasm and pressure internally for flexible working has been notably absent. It might be argued that this is largely because a 24/7, largely shift working workforce often reliant on short notice cover would struggle to meet the working imperatives of such an occupation. Evidence over the past 20 years, however, suggests that negative attitudes towards flexible working, the imperative of a 'full time and uninterrupted' career status (Silvestri, 2006), the gendered nature of the 'flexibility stigma' (Williams *et al.*, 2013) and the premise of the 'ideal worker' in policing still play a part in such resistance (Tuffin and Baladi, 2001; Silvestri, 2017; Scholarios *et al.*, 2017; Chung, 2020). What we see here though is that external pressures have forced police services to accept many of their staff either partially or fully working from home. This research suggests that those working from home have largely benefited from less stress and tiredness and more emotional energy. They also indicated that they were contacted about their well-being in contrast to their colleagues who remained operating from their usual place of work. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, many home workers were in favour of more flexible working arrangements in the future. They were also less anxious than others about another lockdown period. While some officers working from home reported good support from their direct line manager, others' comments reflected the 'flexibility stigma' some senior officers reflected:

My boss has never agreed with working from home. However he is one of a very few dinosaurs left in the organisation. I hope that having been forced to have his staff working from home due to Covid-19 he allows this to continue. We ALL have experienced far less stress

<sup>2</sup> In 2018, the survey reported 43.9% of respondents viewed their job as very or extremely stressful (Elliott-Davis, 2018). This is a larger proportion than reported in the results from the previous 2016 survey Houdmont and Elliott-Davies, 2016 (38.6%) and almost three times that found in the general population by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE, 2012) (15%).

and anxiety, we ALL have said that we have produced more work than we normally would if we were in the office, and we ALL say our fitness and wellness has improved due to working from home, so let's ensure the dinosaurs get to realise how beneficial working from home is. [Working from home partnered sergeant working in a support function with 22 years of service]

Working from home. Despite Force Police allowing this it took a long time for my line Manager to accept it - only allowed in August! [Not working from home, single parent constable working in CID with 28 years of service]

What this suggests is that despite the seemingly rapid way in which forces shut down their offices and relocated workers—the issue of officers not being ‘at their desk’ still seemed to be a problem for some line managers. Penny Dick (2009, p. 182) argues that flexible working of any kind sits uneasily against the dominant norms of full-time work in policing. ‘Not only does professional reduced-hours working pose a challenge to management’s ‘right to manage’, its idiosyncratic nature can expose the precariousness of the dominant order’.

Respondents rated their forces highly when it came to their overall performance and the way in which they policed the public in lockdown. The statistics, however, were less congratulatory when it came to the way in which the Forces looked after them. Those respondents working from home benefited from what they perceived as being ‘looked after’ by their individual forces. Sixty per cent were very or fairly satisfied compared with 54% partially working from home and 32% not working from home. These statistically significant patterns occurred when respondents were asked whether they were contacted about their well-

being with 68% of home workers said this happened, compared with 43% of those partially working from home and 24% not working from home.

The importance of perceived organizational support and feeling valued within an organization is well established in the organizational literature (Lewis, 2010; Den Dulk *et al.*, 2016; van der Lippe and Lippenyi, 2020). Policing studies also recognize the importance of the organizational context for well-being and work life generally (Garbarino *et al.*, 2013; Boateng and Wu, 2018; Purba and Demou, 2019; Laufs and Waseem, 2020) and this is by no means an exhaustive list. So while this research is largely exploratory, its statistically significant findings about organizational support from Forces and in particular their concern for an employee’s welfare are potentially troubling.

It should be noted that police in England and Wales have worked and continue to work closely with government to delay, contain and mitigate the effects of COVID-19. *Operation Talla*, the national operational police response to COVID-19, has facilitated knowledge exchange amongst police organizations in England and Wales via knowledge support portals where officers and staff can directly communicate and share information and ideas with each other about managing the complications that arise from carrying out regular duties under the pressure of a national public health emergency. Specific difficulties have been the actual workload required for police officers and the need for front-line police to ‘pace themselves’ in the light of the need to manage the ongoing pandemic as well as the everyday tasks associated with policing (Weatherill,<sup>3</sup> 2021). In addition to this, as Weatherill (2021) notes, the continuous changes in regulation and government ‘advice’ relating to the pandemic were the source of much confusion and frustration for police. Such challenges remain the case.

<sup>3</sup> ACC Owen Weatherill, Commander, Operation Talla, National Police Chiefs’ Council.



## Conclusions

This was a rapid response survey to capture the immediate experiences of police officers working under difficult conditions of the first lockdown during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Thus as an opportunistic sample, it is not representative of the police workforce and results are presented as first impressions from a sample of women officers. The wish to process the data quickly to feed into recommendations for the likely and in the event the actuality of a second lockdown meant that no reminders were sent out. Police operate in a management culture where long hours and intensification of working time are expected—so this risks context-specific results (Scholarious *et al.*, 2017).

Notwithstanding these limitations, there is a strong indication from these results that working under COVID prevention working conditions were more stressful compared with previously. Under these pressures, the police service did overcome its ambivalence to more flexible working, and contrary to previous findings that these workers felt marginalized, forces took considerable efforts to support home working and made contact with officers. Unfortunately, it seems to have been at the expense of caring for officers who remained at work. As has been reported elsewhere (Azcona *et al.*, 2020), our respondents did seem to carry a greater burden of domestic duties during the lockdown. A possible implication of this in a male-dominated working environment may be for a reversion to gender stereotypic divisions of labour. Brown *et al.* (2020) previously reported a degree of gender stereotypic tasking in police forces especially those with a less progressive orientation. They also reported a tendency for less progressive forces to show more sympathy for officer fathers with child care issues than mothers. Laverick and Cain (2015) concluded that the years of austerity had seen an erosion in accountability and monitoring mechanisms of equality policies and potential compromising efforts to mainstream

equality and diversity such as to question the sustainability of the progress made. Our research results point to the potential for a further exacerbation of this trend unless addressed in post-COVID recovery.

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