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## Policing in a pandemic: Responding to Covid-19

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the world that we used to live in. The law enforcement agencies were faced with the unforeseen and unprecedented challenges that created huge risk for public health and law and order in general. Police, as first responders, were required to engage with the public. They had to explain and encourage the public to follow rules and regulations. The pandemic extended the boundaries of policing well beyond that which had previously been understood by both police and the public as legitimate. Also, working for long and uncertain hours amid the pandemic affected the physical and mental health of police personnel.

**Keywords:** anxiety, depression, emergency, hazard, pandemic, legitimate, lockdown, personal protective equipment (PPE), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

### Introduction

Police forces have a wealth of experience in responding to emergencies but COVID-19 is unprecedented in terms of the speed, scale and complexity. The pandemic has, however, not only created heap of challenges for the public health sector but also for law enforcement agencies. As governments restricted social life, the police performed the role of first responders in addition to being expected to enforce the new safety measures. While police frequently assist in emergency situations, policing during the COVID-19 pandemic is different. The fast-changing legislative and guidance frameworks imposed on policing during this crisis have created immense leadership and operational challenges. It also had an impact on police officers health and well-being and their commitment to democratic values of policing during the pandemic.

A plethora of challenges emerged during COVID-19 and police needed to learn from other agencies. At the height of the pandemic, police had to engage with the public as they are the first responders. They had to explain the rules and regulations that were imposed on the people and encourage them to obey the same. They are the ones who even had to enforce the law, fining people for breaching the lockdown protocols.

The pandemic created social upheaval and altered norms for police as for all members of society. While securing public consent remained a core aim, the pandemic had profound effects on police organizations, the ways they work, their relationships with the public they serve and, on police officers themselves. The pandemic extended the boundaries of policing well beyond that which had previously been understood by both police and the public. At the same time, police officers and their organisation were placed under significant stress as a result of dealing with the new situation, with potentially significant implications for the well-being of the people and the ability of the police to function effectively and appropriately. Police officers health and well-being is, by the very nature of the profession, is at increased risk compared to that of the general population, even before dealing with the challenges, stress and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. The extent to which police officers experience stress, affects their mental well-being and this may have serious implications over their individual and collective ability to behave in the ways they are required to during the pandemic.

### Impact of covid-19 on police at an organizational level

Beyond the physical dangers associated with the pandemic, there were also other dangers to officers well-being, these being increased stress and reduced availability of healthy coping mechanisms. A lack of inadequate pre-disaster planning is often the first potential hurdle police faces while dealing with an adverse situation like the pandemic. It is relevant to gain

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an in-depth understanding of the situation but also to anticipate future developments that could negatively impact resource and staffing levels further. This includes recognising that a pandemic could come in multiple waves, hitting police services more than once. Strategic determination of how staffing losses may impact the functioning of operations as well as the availability of specialized skills and knowledge is crucial. A dire need of technological and non-technological mitigation tools was felt during the pandemic.

The knowledge of the threat can be a valuable tool for officers to educate the population but also to ensure they can protect themselves and their families too. It is important for officers to receive adequate training about the dangers of contracting a disease as an occupational hazard in the dire times when they are dealing with a threat like the COVID-19 pandemic.

A lack of available personnel due to absenteeism and illnesses places additional stress on the pool of available officers and can become a limiting factor for even the simplest police operations. In addition, working with a diminished force can severely impact officers' performance and professional standards.

The police had to take up the role of leaders while dealing with the pandemic. Police officials were seen not only enforcing the regulatory orders, but also extending humanitarian assistance to those in distress. At the local level, they coordinated with several NGOs to distribute relief material among those hit by the closure of economic activities. Patrol cars, whenever not otherwise engaged, were utilized to transport the sick to hospitals or provide help to senior citizens. There were even cases of policemen giving their blood to patients in critical condition.

### Challenges

Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on police-community relations and public trust in the police. While effective and successful police response to disasters and emergency events can put people out of harm's way and ensure public safety and well-being, ineffective police response can undermine public trust and confidence in the police. In terms of police-community relations, officers may be required to switch between different and diverse responsibilities such as enforcing lockdown restrictions, crime control and response, and public order maintenance.

Limited and outdated equipment and supplies is also great cause of concern. The type of necessary equipment required may vary contextually, but lack of it can quickly cripple the response capacity of the police. A lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks or gloves, for instance, can create serious issues for law enforcement agencies. Outbreaks amongst the police also had devastating consequences on readiness of the force. Adequate equipment for police is not only important for the sake of self-protection but is fundamental to the efficiency of the organisation as a whole.

One of the primary challenges in pandemic policing is maintaining relations with the community while ensuring compliance with new regulations and restrictions. Because both citizens and officers are often under increased stress, police-citizen encounters during a period of a crisis can be particularly challenging. This is especially the case if citizens refuse government guidelines or deliberately break measures as a form of political dissent.

Domestic violence during the pandemic has significantly increased. The pandemic led populations to confinement at home, with increased risk of domestic violence due to extended shared time between victims and offenders.

The police force also had to face misconduct at the hands of the citizens whom they are so desperately trying to protect. The tragedy is that that even though they were performing duties under such hazardous conditions, there were incidents of people attacking and throwing stones at them. Incidents like these greatly effect and damage the morale of the police personnel.

The psychological and physical well-being of police personnel also suffered greatly during the pandemic. Close proximity with the infected persons proved to a major source of stress among the police personnel. As first responders it is their duty but it also puts them in great risk. They are at high risk for developing psychological problems, such as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), acute stress disorder, as well as psychological distress, trauma, anxiety and depression, fear and substance abuse.

The duties of police officers also include crowd control and maintenance of public order, retrieval and removal of bodies, transporting and aiding affected civilians, some of whom may be hostile towards police officers, and maintaining communication with their communities through limited infrastructural capacity. In addition, officers may face a lack of rest, resources and provisions, distance from their families and social networks, depriving them of social support. Constant fear about their own health and safety only adds a great amount of stress and anxiety.

### Conclusion

Police-community relations are adversely affected during a public health emergency. Tensions on both sides heightened because officers have to enforce measures that infringe upon civil liberties. A lack of knowledge and understanding of a disease or virus such as COVID-19 may also result in discrimination and mistreatment of infected persons on the part of the police. Police response during and in the aftermath of COVID-19 should adapt to the changing expectations and demands of citizens at various points of the outbreak. And they must also adopt different styles of policing during and after the lockdowns. Police as an organisation should also design adequate messaging and social media strategies to efficiently use online communication to interact with citizens and ensure compliance with public health restrictions.

As we have seen in the recent protests, the collective refusal of the protesters to wear PPE kits puts police officers maintaining public order at great risk. During these protests it is very hard for the police and security forces to closely monitor the movement and spread of the virus.

Covid-19 increased the likelihood of police officers to suffer from psychological stress, posttraumatic stress, depression and anxiety. Additionally, pre-crisis training policies should be institutionalized to develop the skills and competencies needed for officers to prevent mental health problems. Moreover, supportive organizational practices should be encouraged to enable the reporting of mental health complaints, facilitate communication between first responders, peers, and supervisors, and destigmatize the issue of mental health.

Sensitizing police officers towards affected communities

and towards their own roles during complex crises is very important. For fair and just treatment of people suspected of having contracted infections or viruses, policies should be implemented on departmental levels and adequate training be provided to educate police officers on humanely treating affected persons and raise awareness about public health issues and the occupational dangers they may create for police officers. Social support has been strongly related with positive psychological recovery. In addition, social support was found to have a positive effect on job satisfaction and work engagement in the aftermath of disasters.

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