

Policing a Pandemic: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Law Enforcement Agencies

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The problem

Public health emergencies create unique challenges for police demand, response, and intraorganizational dynamics. What are some of the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to create for police organisations and officers and how can these be addressed and overcome?

What we know about the impact of public health emergencies on policing and how we know it

A systematic review on the impact of extreme crises, such as natural disasters and public health emergencies (PHE) on law enforcement agencies and personnel identified four broad areas of concern:

1. **The impact on intraorganizational dynamics:** PHEs often test existing emergency plans to their limits. Pandemics, especially, tend to create resource shortages and staff absenteeism (e.g. officers falling sick) on the one hand, while driving service demand up on the other. The latter is often increased through a surge of specific crimes such as fraud, the need to enforce crisis-specific measures, and the increased time and effort needed to deal with even minor incidents.
2. **The impact on officer wellbeing:** PHEs can increase the likelihood of police officers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. At the same time such crises increase the dependency on unhealthy coping mechanisms such as the abuse of drugs or alcohol. Police culture can become a barrier between mental health problems and getting support through counselling, therapy, etc. Nevertheless, police officers are more resilient than other first responders, potentially because of the training they receive and the screening processes involved in their recruitment.
3. **The impact on police community relations:** Police-community relations are likely to suffer during a PHE. Tensions on both sides might be heightened because officers may have to enforce measures that infringe civil liberties. A lack of knowledge and understanding of a disease amongst officers can result in discrimination and mistreatment of infected persons on the part of the police (highlighted for example through the case of policing HIV/AIDS).
4. **The impact on inter-organisational collaboration:** Poor communication and a lack of trust between organisations (e.g. because of competing strategic interests) can delay coordination efforts necessary to mitigate the adverse consequences of a crisis. This can also include struggles for competencies or the assigning of blame between agencies.

What we think might happen in the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to affect police departments worldwide in a number of ways. First, existing disaster plans will need to be revised and, in some cases, police departments will need to put into place relevant plans for public health emergencies for the first time. These plans will need to account for the fact that the pandemic could come in multiple waves or phases, hitting police services more than once. As such, they should be updated constantly, and responses may need to shift from the initial shock to longer-term plans. The pandemic is likely to create unprecedented resource strains and staff shortages, especially given how exposed police officers are and the challenges they face in maintaining social distancing measures in the field. In addition, as recent months have shown, specific crimes such as fraud, domestic violence and online grooming have been on the rise, increasing the workload for some units disproportionately.

These stressors are going to be exacerbated as members of the public may refuse to cooperate and comply with public health regulations, or even attack police officers (e.g. in the form of 'cough attacks'). To cope with the lack of staff, police officers may be required to work longer shifts and, being first responders, they may need to isolate from their families. These practical challenges, coupled with the fear of contracting COVID-19, are going to adversely impact the mental wellbeing of police officers. With increased stress, police officers are more likely to develop symptoms of PTSD or depression. Some of these symptoms may well develop after the PHE has passed and public health restrictions have eased.

Police-community relations also risk being adversely affected – especially in cases where the police have to enforce lockdown measures. New legislation and frameworks that allow for increased police power might reduce public trust in the police, especially within communities that have witnessed the effects of militarised police responses during previous epidemics, or within minority and socio-economically marginalised groups. Police-community relations will also be impacted by how police departments and organisations manage the socio-economic crisis and potential unrest in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Some ideas in response

There are a number of ways police departments can attempt to mitigate the adverse effects of COVID-19 on their institutions and officers:

- Creating new staffing procedures can help to address staff shortage and absenteeism. This should anticipate further waves of infections amongst the public and staff. Flexible work arrangements ensure the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable officers and their families.
- To cope with additional service demands, crime prevention efforts (e.g. preventing COVID-19 specific fraud) should be increased and target those most vulnerable directly (e.g. the elderly).
- Leaders should make concerted efforts to acknowledge the work of police officers to increase job satisfaction and provide social support to mitigate the symptoms of PTSD, depression and anxiety. This should be an ongoing effort and is especially important after the crisis.
- To maintain police-community relations and ensure compliance with public health regulations, adequate strategies should be institutionalised for communication between the police and affected communities. Such communication should be flexible and tailored to when it is taking place: prior to, during or after the pandemic. Police officers should also be cognizant of changes in citizens' demands, expectations and needs as the crisis unfolds. Police organisations need a long-term plan to rebuild trust where necessary.
- Police departments should implement adequate policies to raise awareness and prevent the criminalisation of infected persons and the securitisation of public health.
- Agencies should identify existing fault lines in intra- and inter-agency communication and collaboration. Joint training and exercises should be considered to improve preparedness for future public health emergencies and to build intra-agency trust.

Relevant resources

- [Policing the pandemic: Managing the police response to Covid-19 Coronavirus.](#) (Policing Insight)
- [Policing in a time of pandemic: Recommendations for law enforcement.](#) (Edmond J. Safra Center)
- [Coronavirus: Why we must tackle hard questions about police power.](#) (The Conversation)
- [Policing the lockdown: compliance, enforcement and procedural justice.](#) (COVID-19 Special Paper, JDI)

This is one of a series of short, speculative papers developed by the UCL Jill Dando Institute during the current pandemic. It is edited by Nick Tilley and Gloria Laycock and published by University College London. The raison d'être of the series is fully described at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research/covid-19-special-papers>