

Demand Capacity & Welfare Survey 2020 The Impact of COVID-19 February 2021

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Security classification	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not protectively marked	May be published openly / immediately
	<input type="checkbox"/> Protected	Review whether broader publication
	<input type="checkbox"/> Restricted	Not for open publication. Restricted to:
	<input type="checkbox"/> Confidential	

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Executive Summary

- The vast majority of respondents did not feel as though the police powers introduced to manage the COVID-19 crisis had been clear (71%).
- Just under a third of respondents said that their force had managed officers well during the COVID-19 crisis (32%).
- Overall, 26% of respondents believe that they have already had COVID-19, and three percent have had their suspicions confirmed by a positive antigen or antibody test.
- Almost half of the respondents that believed they had contracted COVID-19, believe they did so through work-related activities (45%).
- Over a quarter of respondents said that they were *very* or *extremely worried* about the impact that the COVID-19 crisis will have on them personally (28%).
- Just over a third of officers reported being *very* or *extremely* concerned about becoming unwell with COVID-19 due to having close contact with someone who has COVID-19 in the line of duty (34%).
- 36% of respondents were *very* or *extremely* concerned about having adequate access to COVID-19 testing (antigen and/or antibody diagnostic testing)
- Just under a third of respondents (32%) reported that a member of the public, believed to be carrying COVID-19, had purposely threatened to breathe or cough on them at *least once* over the past six months; whilst almost a quarter (24%) reported experiencing actual attempts at doing so.
- The two roles with the largest proportion of respondents reporting experiencing incidents such as the above, were Custody and Response; indicating that officers serving in these particular roles may be at higher risk of COVID-19 being weaponised against them.
- 39% of respondents indicated that, *in the last six months*, they had seen the body of a person who has died from natural causes (including confirmed and suspected COVID-19 cases) in the line of duty.
- 17% of respondents said they had performed death notifications in instances where people had died due to natural causes (including confirmed and suspected COVID-19 cases).
- Similarly, 17% of respondents reported having been exposed to bodily fluids that were suspected of carrying the COVID-19 infection.

Introduction

The PFEW Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey is a biennial survey that was launched in 2016 in response to unprecedented budgetary cuts and a 14% fall in officer numbers over the previous seven years.¹ Though officer strength has increased slightly between 2018 and 2020, the total number of officers in England and Wales is still far below those recorded before the austerity programme was initiated in 2010. Further, although officer strength has increased slightly, it can take time before new recruits are able to police independently and any anticipated improvements that may ultimately result from increasing officer numbers may not yet be fully realised.

This is the third iteration of the Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey, and this report provides a summary of key findings in relation to the COVID-19 crisis.

The survey was open between the 5th of October and the 23rd November 2020; receiving 12,471 viable responses after data cleaning.²

The response rate for Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey 2020 was approximately 10% of all federated rank officers in England and Wales.³

This year, 32% of respondents identified as female, 63% identified as male, and 5% indicated that they would prefer not to say or identified in another way. The average age of respondents was 42 years old. The majority of respondents were Constables (71%), 20% of respondents were at the rank of Sergeant, and 9% of responses were from those in Inspecting ranks. Further details on respondent demographics can also be found within the Technical Annex which is available on the PFEW website.

Due to the current global health crisis, this year's Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey included a range of questions to help us better understand the impacts of working within the police service during the COVID-19 pandemic, and officers' experiences on the ground. This report begins by presenting officer views on some of the organisational and operational impacts of the COVID-19 crisis (e.g. overtime, staffing levels and officer duties), before exploring some of the more individual impacts of the global pandemic on the officers themselves (e.g. the weaponisation of COVID-19 towards officers, and virus contraction).

¹ Home Office. (2020). *Police Workforce, England and Wales, 31 March 2020: data tables* [Dataset]. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-workforce-england-and-wales-31-march-2020>

² Data were removed where the respondent gave implausible answers: e.g. Length of time in role exceeded length of service etc. For more information, please see the 2020 Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey Technical Annex, which can be downloaded from the PFEW website.

³ For information on the respondents, representativeness (including margins of error) and data weighting, please see the 2020 Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey Technical Annex, which can be downloaded from the PFEW website.

Results

Organisational and operational impacts

Crewing

Overall, 58% of respondents reported that they were *often* or *always* single-crewed.⁴ However, due to the social distancing regulations implemented by the UK government in 2020, forces may have changed their normal operational procedures around crewing to reduce opportunities for infection between colleagues. For example, the NPCC released guidance stating that when officers are double-crewed, and in an enclosed space where social distancing cannot be achieved (e.g. a patrol car), a surgical Type IIR face mask should be worn.⁵ However, some teams/units may have decided to reduce the risk further, by limiting double crewing or placing officers in ‘bubbles’.

As such, this year’s iteration of the Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey included an additional question regarding crewing levels, to ascertain whether the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted on the frequency of single-crewing experienced by officers.

Although 18% of officers reported being single-crewed *more often* due to COVID-19, this figure increases to 25% when specifically examining answers from officers working in Response, and to 22% for Neighbourhood policing.

Staffing levels, overtime and duties

Overall, the vast majority of respondents (70%) indicated that their team/unit had a minimum officer staffing level. Almost a fifth (19%) of these respondents also indicated that this level was *never* or *rarely* achieved,⁶ and 29% indicated that, compared to before the COVID-19 crisis, officer staffing levels are being met *even less frequently*.

Table 1: Compared to before the COVID-19 crisis, these minimum officer staffing levels have been met	% of respondents
More frequently	9%
The same amount	51%
Less frequently	29%
Don't know	11%

⁴ After excluding responses indicating that single crewing was not applicable to them.

⁵ NPCC. (2020). *Personal protective equipment (PPE) operational guidance*.

⁶ For more information on results relating to staffing levels response please see the 2020 Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey PRRB Headline Report, which can be downloaded from the PFEW website.

In order to explore any potential link between COVID-19 and officer staffing levels in more depth, the Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey also asked respondents to indicate the extent to which a number of COVID-19 related absences had affected the officer staffing levels in their team/unit. The results can be found in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Proportion of respondents reporting that the following COVID-19 related absences had a <i>moderate</i> or <i>major</i> effect on officer staffing levels in their team/unit	
Officers that are self-isolating because they have COVID-19 symptoms (but do not have a positive test result)	42%
Officers that are self-isolating because they have had close and recent contact with someone that has tested positive for COVID-19	39%
Officers not at work because they have tested positive for COVID-19	29%
Officers that are in quarantine because they have been abroad	15%

Given the impact of COVID-19 on staffing levels, it may be unsurprising that many officers reported an increase in the amount of overtime that they have worked. Whilst officers, overall, reported working an average (median) of 2.3 hours of overtime per week, 27% of respondents reported that, compared to before the COVID-19 crisis, the amount of overtime they worked had increased (please see Table 3 below).

Table 3: Compared to before the COVID-19 crisis, the amount of overtime you work has	% of respondents
Increased	27%
Stayed the same	61%
Decreased	12%

In March 2020, the government brought in extraordinary measures and legislative changes to slow the spread of COVID-19; with the Police Service being granted new powers to enforce these legislative changes and officers being expected to continue working on the frontline in direct contact with the public.

As such, the Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey asked respondents the extent to which they *agreed* or *disagreed* with a number of statements about the management of officers, and their role in applying these new policing powers (for full details please see Table 4 on the next page). Though the vast majority of respondents did not feel as though the police powers introduced to manage the COVID-19 crisis had been clear (71%), views in regard to the efficacy of the 4 Es approach (Engage, Explain, Encourage, Enforce) were more balanced.

Table 4: To what extent do you agree with the following statements	% of respondents		
	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree
The new police powers introduced to manage the COVID-19 crisis have been clear	71%	19%	10%
My role in enforcing the new police powers introduced to manage the COVID-19 crisis has been clear ⁷	55%	31%	13%
I have found the 4 Es approach (Engage, Explain, Encourage, Enforce) to be effective when dealing with the public	27%	49%	24%
During the pandemic, I've found the public to be supportive of the police when I've been doing my job	35%	40%	25%
I have all the equipment I personally need to protect me from COVID-19 whilst at work	39%	24%	37%

Overall, just under a third of respondents said that their force had managed officers well during the COVID-19 crisis (32%). Though this is a smaller proportion than found a few months earlier by the 2020 PFEW Pay and Morale Survey (49%)⁸ this may, in part, be due to the complex and fast paced programme of change that was applied to the English lockdown laws between the 11th of September (when the Pay and Morale Survey closed) and the 23rd of November (when the Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey closed). During this time:⁹

- England's gathering restriction was tightened and people were once again prohibited from meeting more than six people socially;
- pubs, bars and restaurants were told they had to shut between 10pm and 6am;
- the three-tiered system of lockdown restrictions was imposed on the 14th of October, and finally;
- national restrictions were reintroduced in England on the 5th of November.

As such, the rapidly shifting policing context and constantly changing enforcement framework, may have impacted on forces ability to manage their officers effectively.

To gain a better understanding of the impact that this might have on officers and their workloads, we also asked respondents if they had been performing any specific COVID-19

⁷ Please note, the total proportions for this item do not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding.

⁸ Chandler, N. (2020). *Pay and Morale Survey 2020 – COVID-19 November 2020* [PFEW Report R073/2020]. Available from the PFEW survey Hub: <https://www.polfed.org/resources/survey-hub/>

⁹ Brown, J. (2020). *Coronavirus: A history of English lockdown laws* [House of Commons Library Briefing Paper. Number 9068]. Retrieved from: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9068/>

duties over the previous six months. 28% of respondents indicated that they had been performing specific COVID-19 duties, and whilst many indicated that this was related to the enforcement of the constantly changing Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations; many reported performing duties that extended beyond enforcement, and potentially put them in direct contact with the virus:

- *“I was posted to COVID-19 response team for 2 months, attending to those that had died and suspected to be COVID-19 related. Wrapping bodies for undertaker to remove.”*
Constable, 25 years’ service
- *“Attending possible COVID-19 related sudden deaths”*
Constable, 3 years’ service
- *“Dealing with assault allegations where the suspect has claimed to be COVID-19 infectious and has spat at complainants and Police Officers.”*
Constable, 19 years’ service
- *“Worked in designated COVID-19 custody [...]”*
Sergeant, 21 years’ service
- *“Transporting prisoners who have symptoms or tested positive. Hospital watches of prisoners and long-term exposure to COVID-19 wards”*
Constable 5 years’ service
- *“Welfare checks on COVID-19 positive patients who have been released to their homes from hospital and have become uncontactable. Face mask and thin plastic pinny was the only issued kit for these checks.”*
Constable, 7 years’ service
- *“Domestic abuse outreach boosting to mitigate reduced opportunities for victims to report”*
Inspector 25 years’ service
- *“Dealing with suspected/confirmed positive cases of COVID-19 with detainees in custody”*
Sergeant, 10 years’ service

Officer impacts

Contracting COVID-19

Respondents were asked whether they think they had, or have had, COVID-19. Overall, 26% of respondents believe that they have already had COVID-19, and three percent have had their suspicions confirmed by a positive antigen or antibody test (please see Table 5 below):

Table 5: Do you think that you have, or have had COVID-19?	% of respondents
Yes, confirmed by a positive antigen or antibody test	3%
Yes, based on strong personal suspicion or medical advice	23%
No	47%
Unsure	27%

Respondents that reported contracting COVID-19 were asked to indicate how they thought they had contracted the virus; with 45% reporting that they thought it was through work-related activities, and only 18% reporting that they thought it was through non-work related activities (e.g. contact with family or friends). The remaining 37% were unsure of how they contracted the virus

Examples of where officers believed they had contracted the virus through work could be found in the qualitative data, and includes instances of aggravated and purposeful transmission through the weaponisation of COVID-19, accidental transmission between colleagues, and accidental transmission via contact with members of the public:

- *“I was spat at by a member of public, and about 5 days later tested positive for COVID-19.”*
Constable 3 years’ service
- *“I contracted COVID-19 in late March due to dealing with members of the public just as the first lockdown went into force. I was unaware that I had contracted the virus until almost a week later and therefore also passed the virus on to my family (wife and children). Luckily there were no severe side effects but it was frustrating that inadequate initial response to the management of the pandemic exposed officers right at the start of the virus.”*
Constable 8 years’ service

- *“I attended a sudden death at a care home at the start of the pandemic where advice from HQ was not to wear PPE unless it was a confirmed or suspected COVID-19 death. I therefore wore no mask and gloves only, hand sanitising on entry and exit of the building. There was no indication of this at the time. One and a half weeks after this I tested positive for Coronavirus and passed it onto my family. The advice has now changed and all death at care homes are to be treated as suspected COVID-19 deaths and appropriate PPE worn. Different advice could have protected my family and I.”*
Constable, 5 years’ service
- *“I caught COVID-19 from a social worker during a joint visit”*
Constable, 20 years’ service
- *“I tested positive for COVID-19 and was quite unwell, my wife also tested positive (test was inconclusive but had same symptoms and was unwell - later tested positive for antibodies). We both had to self-isolate with our two children at the same time. I have not been the same (health wise) since. I am worried about the possibility of reinfection and/or the long-term implications following the illness. I strongly believe I contracted COVID-19 from a colleague from my station who also tested positive the week before me and ended up in hospital. (We had spent several shifts working closely).”*
Constable, 19 years’ service

Some officers even spoke directly about their experience of COVID-19 and the impact this had on them and their families:

- *“I got COVID-19 whilst on duty and it has affected my entire life since spring 2020 [date specified: removed to maintain anonymity]. This has impacted my mental health and overall mood. The stress of returning to work and trying to complete the required training is stressful and concerns me.”*
Constable, 1 years’ service
- *“I believe I had COVID-19 and my family were at risk. I felt so bad that I felt like I wouldn't make it. My husband is a [Force specified: removed to maintain anonymity] officer and was working with someone whose dad had travelled from china and had COVID-19. At this point everyone should have isolated but the job failed to put tough measures in”*
Constable, 7 years’ service

- *“I caught COVID-19 and viral pneumonia whilst at work and have only just returned after 8 months off sick.”*

Constable 19 years’ service

- *“Having suffered from COVID-19 and testing positive whilst the main have been very supportive including the Force Ex and the Federation were amazing, I found others to be stand offish and worried that any contact with me could infect them. This is caused due to lack of knowledge and whilst I do not take it personally it has opened my eyes to the unconscious bias held in us all”*

Sergeant, 18 years’ service

- *“I got COVID-19 from my wife who worked for the NHS, it was 2 weeks of awful symptoms and yet no one seemed to believe me. Only when I had the antibody test to say I had indeed had it, did everyone start to realise.”*

Inspector 28 years’ service

Officer concerns

28% of respondents said that they were *very* or *extremely worried* about the impact that the COVID-19 crisis will have on them personally. To explore officer worries more widely, the Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey asked several additional questions on a range of issues that could potentially be causing officers concern (please see Table 6). 36% of respondents were *very* or *extremely* concerned about having adequate access to COVID-19 testing (antigen and/or antibody diagnostic testing), and just over a third of officers reported being *very* or *extremely* concerned about becoming unwell with COVID-19 due to having close contact with someone who has COVID-19 in the line of duty (34%).

Table 6: Proportion of respondents reporting that they were *very* or *extremely* concerned over the following

Having adequate access to COVID-19 testing (antigen and/or antibody diagnostic testing)	36%
Becoming unwell with COVID-19 due to having close contact with someone who has COVID-19 in the line of duty	34%
Having adequate access to PPE whilst at work	26%
Enforcing the lockdown restrictions	25%
Becoming unwell with COVID-19 due to being assaulted by someone who has COVID-19 in the line of duty	23%

Officer safety

Many officers reported incidents where members of the public had sought to weaponise the threat of COVID-19 by purposely coughing, spitting or breathing on others.

Just under a third of respondents to the 2020 Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey (32%) reported that a member of the public, believed to be carrying COVID-19, had purposely threatened to breathe or cough on them at *least once* over the past six months; whilst almost a quarter (24%) reported experiencing actual attempts at doing so (please see Table 7).

Table 7: How often have citizens, that you believed to have COVID-19, directed the following towards you during the last 6 months?	% of respondents reporting a frequency of <i>once or more</i>
Threatened to spit at you	30%
Threatened to breathe or cough on you	32%
Attempted to spit at you	21%
Deliberately attempted to breathe or cough on you	24%

However, when examining the results for the items above by officer role, an interesting trend emerged. The role with the largest proportion of respondents reporting experiencing each of the incidents listed above, *at least once or more* over the previous six months, were Custody and Response (please see Table 8). This may indicate that officers serving in these particular roles are at higher risk of COVID-19 being weaponised against them.

Table 8: How often have citizens, that you believed to have COVID-19, directed the following towards you during the last 6 months?	% of respondents reporting a frequency of <i>once or more</i>	
	Custody	Response
Threatened to spit at you	65%	58%
Threatened to breathe or cough on you	65%	59%
Attempted to spit at you	52%	42%
Deliberately attempted to breathe or cough on you	53%	46%

Perhaps then, it is unsurprising that although only 57% of respondents reported having access to spit guards at all times whilst on duty, 81% *would like* to have access to spit guards at all times whilst on duty.¹⁰

¹⁰ After excluding responses indicating that spit guards were not applicable to their role.

Our concern over the risks to our members is, however, not restricted to physical hazards alone. Officers regularly encounter extremely distressing and/or dangerous events in the line of duty, many of which are directly related to the COVID-19 crisis.

Almost two fifths (39%)¹¹ of respondents indicated that, *in the last six months*, they had seen the body of a person who has died from natural causes (including confirmed and suspected COVID-19 cases) in the line of duty; whilst 17% of respondents said they had performed death notifications in instances where people had died due to natural causes (including confirmed and suspected COVID-19 cases), and the same proportion reported having been exposed to bodily fluids that were suspected of carrying the COVID-19 infection.

Table 9: Over the last six months have you experienced any of the following in the line of duty...?	% of respondents		
	Never	At least once	Twice or more
Seen the body of a person who has died from natural causes (including confirmed and suspected COVID-19 cases)	62%	11%	27%
Performed death notifications in instances where people have died from natural causes (including confirmed and suspected COVID-19 cases)	83%	9%	8%
Been exposed to bodily fluids that are suspected of carrying the COVID-19 infection	83%	8%	9%

In light of the devastating impact that COVID-19 has had across the length and breadth of the UK, officers were also presented with a final question about their experiences of policing throughout the pandemic.

More specifically, officers were presented with an open-ended question asking them to tell us about any other events they may have experienced (in the line of duty) that were related to COVID-19, and that they found particularly disturbing or caused a significant amount of emotional distress. Over a thousand comments were received, with many officers using the space to detail experiences of COVID-19 being weaponised against them, body recovery, family liaison work with those that had lost loved-ones to the pandemic, the cumulative pressure of the work, and the wider societal impact of the pandemic on the public's mental health:

¹¹ Please note, this is an aggregated proportion and may differ slightly from data in the figure below after rounding. For more information on aggregation of data, please see the 2020 Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey Technical Annex

- *“The increase in mental health issues, and dealing with people in crisis/expressing suicidal thoughts, has been difficult cumulatively.”*

Constable, 14 years’ service

- *“A suspect who was believed to have COVID-19 (his family had tested positive) deliberately spat a mouthful of juice in my face whilst in custody and said he hoped that I died.”*

Constable, 10 years’ service

- *“Alongside my team we prepared bodies ready for the undertaker to remove and after investigating the deaths we had to deal with the trauma of the family”*

Sergeant, 20 years’ service

- *“Since March my team and I have seen a huge increase in self harm and suicide calls. Between April and July it felt like there was a suicide per set of shifts. I can personally count as having gone to 5 or more in that period. One in particular was a male who put a high velocity rifle to his head. There have been numerous hangings and due to working in a coastal area, there have also been several bodies recovered from the cliffs or sea.”*

Sergeant, 19 years’ service

- *“After dealing for 3 months with COVID-19 deaths in the community I feel that there have been numerous disturbing things I have seen. Mainly when people with young families have passed away and left young children”*

Constable, 18 years’ service

- *“Performing CPR on a person where there is a considerable amount of body fluid from them and having no idea if they have COVID-19”*

Constable 18 years’ service

- *“Having to attend hospital clinical areas to see victims just wearing a paper mask. It worries me every time, and I find myself changing my clothes more regularly now at work before coming home as I'm worried about what I could have picked up while I'm in work and bring home to my children”*

Constable 12 years’ service

- *“Being spat at by a detainee who said he had COVID-19. Worried and distressed that I would pass this onto my loved ones or get seriously ill myself.”*
Constable 11 years’ service
- *“I dealt with a prisoner who spat in the mouth of a serving officer a colleague. I found the whole situation worrying especially watching the bodycam as he shouted CORONA when spitting in the mouth of the male PC. He was remanded and sent to Court and got NO SENTENCE. We are not supported by the judicial system.”*
Constable 15 years’ service
- *“Dealing with a welfare check on a male refusing to answer door to a friend. On attending, the person inside was gravely ill with COVID-19 symptoms. He was doing all he could to avoid other people getting sick and was preparing to die by himself. After attending, I spent time talking with the man to try and reassure him it was our jobs to make sure he got the help he really needed. I can only assume this man is now dead, but I have not forgotten him.”*
Constable 25 years’ service
- *“Increase in people suffering with mental health conditions, social care issues, housing issues etc that police have been dealing with because other services are working from home.”*
Constable, 2 years’ service

Appendix A

Further information on this survey can be found in the 2020 Demand, Capacity and Welfare's Technical Annex, including:

- Background and context
- Content overview
- Distribution of the survey
- Details of respondents, response rates and representativeness
- Demographics
- Analytical approach
- Weighting
- Grouping and aggregation of response options
- Benchmarking
- Uses of the survey data

The Technical Annex for the 2020 Demand, Capacity and Welfare Survey can be found here:
<https://www.polfed.org/support/demand-capacity-welfare/>.