

# 'It's pretty brutal': Police Culture & Mental Wellness

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# Policing & Mental Illness: A Review

- Deinstitutionalization in 1950s & 1960s & spending reductions in community care
- “De facto mental health providers” (Cotton, 2004, pp. 135)
- Sammy Yatim, Robert Dziekanski, Paul Boyd, Abdirahman Abdi
- Mental Health Units (MHU) to respond to People in Crisis (PIC)

# Police Culture & Mental Wellness

- The role of police culture in addressing mental health concerns of MHU members
- Police Culture → Attitude → Behaviour
- Cynicism, Machoism, Perception of Danger, Camaraderie (Traditional)
- Individual officer attitudes, Mandate of police organization, individual officer rank (Emerging)

# Methodology

- Primary Response MHU
- Twelve in-depth, semi structured interviews
  - One senior police official
  - One MHU Staff Sergeant
  - Four MHU officers
  - Four MHU Mental Health Professionals (MHP)
  - Use of force instructor
  - Civilian Manager of Mental Health Professionals
- 30-hours of direct observation (ride-alongs)

# Emotional Impact of MHU Policing

- Brandon, MHP: “It’s hard to find the right kind of people who can keep this kind of pace and deal with that vicarious trauma”.
- Gary, MHP: “We see stuff that other people shouldn’t see”.
- Emotional Commitment
  - “That was probably my darkest day here”
  - “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink”

# Emotional Impact of MHU Policing

“Let’s not kid each other, it takes a special kind of officer and we need to watch our officers very carefully” – Senior Police Official

# Camaraderie & Mental Wellness

- Impact of culture on behaviour
- Critiques of camaraderie (see Chan, 1997)
- “If you take shit too seriously, you’ll get into trouble”
- Existing mental health support system
- Preference of informal methods
- “Defending” fellow colleagues
- Camaraderie with superiors

# Conclusion

- Despite critiques, camaraderie plays an important role in addressing mental health concerns of MHU members
  - Humour
  - Existing mental health support system
  - Defending colleagues
  - Relationship with superiors
- While police responses to PIC are heavily criticized, it is important to closely monitor members of police organizations for signs of mental illness
- Direction of future research...