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TRAUMA-INFORMED TRAINING IN POLICE CUSTODY: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summary:

This project describes a qualitative case study of the perceptions of impact of trauma-informed training on a single police custody suite, where all custody staff had completed an evidenced-based training package devised by NHS Education Scotland (NES). Focus groups and interviews were conducted with three groups: i) custody staff ii) senior staff with responsibility for custody staff and iii) keyworkers from a women's support organisation linked to the custody suite.

The aim was to examine the perceptions of the impact of the training concerning day-to-day working in police custody, a service-level perspective and external views on the extent of any impact. The results suggested that the trauma-informed training had positive impacts in relation to police knowledge, attitudes and potentially to behaviour. There was agreement that police custody is an critical window of opportunity to route people to positive destinations, but that further work remains to be done in relation to moving fully towards a trauma-informed police custody.

Recommendations:

1. Further developing an inter-agency approach is crucial to facilitate the best possible custody experience and referral pathways for people in custody.
2. Trauma-informed training needs to be ongoing as one-off training limits reflection on, and development of, practical skills.
3. Where staff can use their discretion regarding certain custody procedures (e.g., strip search, use of restraint), this should be communicated to them with clear guidance and support for justifying deviations from standard protocol.
4. Services should pay greater attention to the application of trauma-informed approaches in supporting police staff.

INTRODUCTION

A large body of research has highlighted that people who come into contact with the criminal justice system have experienced a disproportionate level of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or trauma (Craig et al, 2017; Ford et al., 2019; Fleming and Nurius, 2020). In response, there has been an increasing motivation for police to become trauma-informed. Harris and Fallot (2001) introduced the term to describe a systems-level approach to acknowledging that people who interact with the system may have experienced trauma and to respond in ways that avoid re-traumatisation and support people to positive outcomes.

Despite this, the knowledge that people detained in custody have trauma in their lives is not effectively interwoven into custody settings. Trauma-informed approaches are particularly relevant to police custody for a number of reasons. Being detained in police custody is potentially traumatising experience (Baksheev, Thomas and Ogloff, 2012; Dehaghani (2021) and people who are detained in police custody often have long-standing mental health or substance use issues (Baksheev, Thomas, and Ogloff, 2012) that increase vulnerability. Being aware of the potential impact of trauma on an individual's behaviour, development and life course can lead to a better understanding of why people offend and re-offend. This, in turn, has the potential to generate new ways of thinking about how officers interact with people in custody settings to promote more positive outcomes. At the same time, police custody exists to apprehend those suspected of committing crime and has elements that are potentially in opposition to trauma-informed approaches. Qualitative investigations of the perceptions of police who have completed trauma-informed training are therefore particularly helpful in identifying how police respond to training.

CURRENT ISSUES

Literature review

Within the UK, there is an increasing recognition that responding to vulnerability is a key feature of modern policing (College of Policing, 2015). A large body of research also highlights that people who come into contact with the criminal justice system have experienced a disproportionate level of childhood adverse experiences (ACEs) or trauma (Craig et al, 2017; Ford et al., 2019; Fleming and Nurius, 2020). In response, there has been an increasing motivation for police to become trauma-informed. Harris and Fallot (2001) introduced the term to describe a systems-level approach to acknowledging that people who interact with the system may have experienced trauma and to understanding how previous trauma may relate to current behaviours.

Trauma and ACEs: definition and impact

Although definitions of trauma vary, it can be broadly defined as “an event, a series of events or a set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening.” (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 7). Trauma can be physical, psychological or emotional in nature and can be linked to a single event (e.g. a physical or sexual assault or a road traffic accident), a series of similar events (childhood sexual abuse or domestic abuse) or a combination of adverse events (e.g. childhood neglect, parental divorce and family substance use). Experiences of trauma and adversity can affect mental health, behaviour and emotions. In particular, trauma and adversity in childhood has the potential to impact brain functioning and stress responding system, leading to chronic arousal and difficulties in calming after threat (Duffy et al., 2018; Tomalski and Johnson, 2010). Trauma and adversity have been linked to an increased risk for involvement with the criminal justice system across the lifespan (Honorato, Caltabiano, and Clough, 2016; Wolff, and Shi, 2012).

What is a trauma-informed approach?

Being trauma-informed means recognising the impact that trauma, including but not limited to ACEs, has on an individual, seeking to avoid re-traumatisation with shame, blame or unnecessary physical intervention and providing appropriate support. Taking a trauma-informed approach can enable people to change and encourages desistance (Rowles and McCartan, 2019). Trauma-informed approaches are service-level approaches that apply to people working within the service, as well as service users.

The National Trauma Training Programme (NTTP; NHS Education Scotland) conceptualises trauma-informed as being underpinned by five Rs:

- **Realising** how common the experience of trauma and adversity is
- **Recognising** the different ways that trauma can affect people
- **Responding** by taking account of the ways that people can be affected by trauma to support recovery
- Opportunities to **Resist re-traumatisation** and offer a greater sense of choice and control, empowerment, collaboration and safety with everyone that you have contact with
- Recognising the central importance of **Relationships**

Trauma in police custody

In police custody, recognition of vulnerability is paramount to prevent re-traumatisation and potentially route detainees to support services. Individuals who enter a custody suite are often vulnerable through a trauma history, mental illness, substance abuse, age, or gender (Baksheev, Thomas, and Ogloff, 2012; HMIC, 2015). Identifying vulnerability is complex, for example distinguishing between the influence of substances and a mental health crisis is challenging (Clayfield et al., 2011).

Furthermore, police custody is a busy and chaotic environment, which, together with lack of privacy, presents relational challenges to detainees in disclosing vulnerability issue to police (McKinnon and Finch, 2018). Additionally, while police may be willing to engage with individuals with complex histories, they do not always connect behaviour to historical trauma (Auty et al., 2018).

The experience of custody per se can be re-traumatising for individuals. Custody suites are fundamentally intended to house perpetrators and not victims despite most perpetrators having been themselves victims at one point (Miller and Najavits, 2012). Mental health problems can be further compounded by the custody environment (Baksheev, Thomas and Ogloff, 2012), while common procedures such as restraint and strip searches can be potentially re-traumatising (Covington, 2008; Vaswani, 2015). Dehaghani (2021) has argued that the custody suite per se reduces individual resilience, rendering detainees vulnerable through a combination of isolation, limited interactions with others, lack of control, and uncertainty, leading Skinns (2011) to characterise custody as 'mini prison'. On the other hand, custody can present a unique opportunity for assessment and intervention in a group of people who are often reluctant or unable to access mainstream services (Bradley, 2009).

Current Study

Govan custody suite in Glasgow provided a unique opportunity to explore the experiences and impact of a service-wide trauma-informed initiative. Officers and civilian staff (Police Custody Security Officers) situated in Govan custody suite engaged with NES trauma-informed training between September-October 2020, with a completion rate of 100%. A case study approach was taken to gather in-depth qualitative perceptions of the impact of the training from several perspectives.

Research Aims and Objectives

Using an in-depth qualitative approach, the aim of this study was to explore the impact of trauma-informed training on custody staff from an individual and service-level perspective, as well as gathering an external view from a linked support service. The aim was to capture rich data on the impact of the training, as well as identifying barriers to trauma-informed working as well as potential areas for future development.

Three data sources were:

- i) Focus groups with custody staff (police officers and Police Custody and Security Officers (PCSOs)). These focused on the experience of the trauma-informed training and implementation in police custody,
- ii) Focus group with keyworkers from a women's support service linked to the custody suite (TWG). This provided an external view on the extent to which the custody suite was trauma-informed, particularly in relation to support referrals,
- iii) Interviews with senior staff aligned to the introduction of the trauma-informed training, or who had responsibility for custody suite staff. These interviews focused on service-level views on drivers of the trauma-informed training.

Data collection

Custody staff group: Three focus groups were conducted online with nine participants. Of these, four were Police Custody and Security Officers (PCSOs), two were sergeants and three were police constables. Three were female and six were male. Participants ranged in age from 34 to 50 years (Mean = 42.67 years). Years in police service ranged from 3 to 20 years (Mean = 12.22 years).

Senior staff group: Four interviews were conducted with senior staff aligned to the custody suite. These were two sergeants and two inspectors. All were male; ages ranged from 39 to 50 years (Mean = 45 years). Length of service with the police ranged from 17 to 22 years (Mean = 18.75 years).

Support service group: Data collection with support service keyworkers took place in August 2022. A single online focus group, lasting 30 minutes, took place with three keyworkers from TWG. These were a criminal justice social worker, a social care worker and a community psychiatric nurse. Length of service ranged from 5 to 15 years (mean = 9).

Results

Summary and recommendations from custody staff

Custody staff linked the training to deeper reflection on past trauma in people and empowered conversations with detained people and colleagues and potentially led to less reactive behaviour in challenging situations. Police custody was viewed as an opportunity for positive intervention, but public perceptions of the police hampered support referrals. External support was viewed as more palatable. Custody staff perceived that the service could be more trauma-informed in relation to police staff. Recommendations were:

- Trauma-informed training needs to be refreshed or augmented over time. It cannot be a one-off training
- Service should pay greater attention to trauma-informed approaches to police staff, particularly in relation to critical incidents
- Facilitate referrals to external support agencies or increase opportunities for external support services within custody

Summary and recommendations from support service keyworkers

Support service staff viewed police custody is an opportunity to connect with hard-to-reach individuals, who were not in contact with other services therefore inter-agency working is crucial to creating positive pathways for detained people. They noted that there were missed opportunities for intervention due to incomplete or inappropriate referrals. Keyworker attributed this to individual attitude or a lack of training in some police staff.

- More could be done to afford dignity to people in custody, through provision of toiletries, clothing etc.
- Joint training between police and support services would highlight need for complete referral information
- Great linkage between support services and custody staff/nurses would facilitate successful referrals
- Having support service representatives on site would be optimal

Summary and recommendations from senior staff

Senior staff were of the view that a trauma-informed custody suite in Govan was a long-term goal that would be difficult to evidence in the short-term. They agreed that further work needed to be done to embed trauma-informed ways of working, including further training and supporting staff in interpreting policies and procedures through a trauma-informed lens. A perceived lack of support for

mental health of officers was viewed as barrier to changing staff attitudes. Multi-agency working was seen as way to counteract resource limitations. Recommendations were:

- Clear communication that trauma-informed responses are the responsibility of all staff
- Provide guidance to staff on how policies and procedures can be interpreted flexibly to avoid re-traumatisation or harm occurring
- Further acknowledge the impact of workplace trauma on staff, particularly immediate responses to traumatic incidents
- In the longer-term, determine potential outcome measures that would evidence change from trauma-informed practice

KEY FINDINGS

1. Effectiveness of the training

Based on the qualitative data from custody staff, the NES training had a positive impact. Officers and PCSOs who participated were able to articulate a nuanced understanding of trauma, its impacts and presenting behaviours. Staff who had participated in group discussions following the training found greater benefits. The majority felt they would have benefitted from refresher training or enhanced training. This view was shared by the senior staff who felt that the training had been the first step, but more could be initiated by the service, for example having custody sergeants undertake enhanced training to support staff under their care.

Senior staff noted that outcomes from trauma-informed training might be difficult to measure to evidence success, and that any measurable impact was likely to take many years to manifest.

2. Importance of relationships

Custody staff suggested that benefits of the training included greater aware of the effects of trauma in people in custody and in colleagues and feeling more empowered to engage in conversations around mental health. Police custody is a fast-paced environment, with limited opportunities to establish relationships. Yet, trauma-informed staff found ways to interact with people detained in custody that facilitated establishing a rapport and noted benefits from this, including greater disclosure of support needs and, for some, a means of defusing challenging situations. The 'tend and befriend' approach has been previously noted in the context of high stress situations (Taylor, 2012). Enhanced understanding of the links between trauma and neurobiological responses may also help officers to control emotions during stressful encounters (Stelnicki et al, 2021).

3. Barriers to change

Custody staff and senior officers agreed that time and resource constraints hampered trauma-informed practice, as custody staff have limited capacity to engage with people in a meaningful way. Despite

this, some custody staff felt it was possible to respond in trauma-informed ways within the current time constraints. Both custody staff and keyworkers noted that individual variation in motivation to support people in custody was a determining factor in how custody staff responded.

Both custody and senior staff noted that officers were inherently constrained by policies and procedures of the organisation and that deviation from these shifted responsibility onto individual staff, creating potential staff concerns.

4. Police culture

Police culture is distinct from many other public-facing services, as a primary role is crime detection and prevention (Brough et al., 2016; Caveny et al., 2020). The cultural context of policing was raised as a barrier to implementing trauma-informed practice, both through public suspicion of support offered by officers and through a perceived lack of attitudinal change in some police staff, leading to a reduced motivation to engage with support of custody detainees. At the same time, there was a prevailing view that police culture is slowly changing and trauma-informed initiatives have the potential to support this.

5. Referrals to support services

All participants were unanimous in the view that referring people to appropriate external support was a key element of a trauma-informed custody suite. Both custody staff and keyworkers viewed custody as a 'critical juncture' where support could be offered to people who otherwise would not access it. These group differed in how they conceptualised it. Custody staff viewed referral to external support necessary, as their role was not predominantly focused on support. By contrast, keyworkers expressed a wish to have greater integration within custody and increased knowledge sharing between custody and support services. The broader literature on partnerships suggests that having a shared vision is pivotal to overcoming structural, procedural barriers to inter-agency working (Hardy et al., 2003). In this case study, there was agreement that support has the potential to improve the lives of people in custody and route them to a positive destination, potentially reducing re-offending.

CONCLUSION

The custody suite in Govan provided a unique opportunity to examine the perceived impact of trauma-informed training when delivered wholesale to custody staff in a specific custody suite. Furthermore, the combined views of respondents in three distinct groups: custody staff, a service level view and views from a linked support service highlighted agreement on key issues. The first is that police custody is a critical juncture for supporting people with trauma or adversity in their background, potentially leading to pathways to desistance. Secondly, the view that all services should be working from a trauma-informed perspective to promote positive outcomes. In relation to this, barriers and opportunities were raised.

There was also a common view that working towards becoming trauma-informed should be a long-term goal that might not be easily measurable in the short-term, and is linked to changing police

culture. Further steps beyond staff training are required and greater embedding within policies and procedures are required. From a police perspective, a wider definition of trauma-informed practice is required. This includes a focus on the potential trauma of police staff, as well as attending to that of people detained in custody.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Key recommendations for policy and practice:

- 1. Working towards a multi-agency approach is crucial to facilitate the best possible custody experience and referral pathways for women in custody.**
 - i. Through working with external support services, more can be done to afford dignity and reduce shame for women whilst in custody, through provision of toiletries, clothing etc.
 - ii. Joint training between custody staff and external support services would help facilitate the sharing of key information needed to ensure quality and appropriateness of referrals.
 - iii. Where possible, the use of in-house representatives from external services to provide support and advice to both service users and staff would help reduce the number of steps from first presentation to receiving support.
- 2. Trauma-informed training needs to be ongoing as one-off training limits reflection on, and development of, practical skills.**
 - i. Refresher training should be offered to identify ongoing gaps in understanding or application, and identify developments in best practice.
 - ii. Training must be responsive to the contexts that staff encounter, which may require augmenting of resources to ensure they are relevant to different staff groups.
- 3. Where staff can use their discretion regarding certain custody procedures (e.g., strip search, use of restraint), this should be communicated to them with clear guidance and support for justifying deviations from standard protocol.**
- 4. Services should pay greater attention to the application of trauma-informed approaches in police staff support.**
 - i. Risk management support offered to police officers should also be advertised and made available to custody staff, particularly in relation to critical incidents in custody.
 - ii. Understanding and seeking support for vicarious trauma should feature more prominently in future trauma-informed training.

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