

## **INTEGRATING THE PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLNESS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS IN SOUTH AFRICA AND UGANDA**



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## Acknowledgement

I Miss Mpfareleni Mabidi, acknowledge the completion of this document through the support of various research sources and institutional partners. This work was developed based on the referenced research materials and greatly strengthened by the guidance and collaborative input received.

I extend my appreciation to NOREC for their continuous support in strengthening capacity building initiatives across organizations, and to Justice Access Point (JAP) for their invaluable contributions, insights and commitment towards advancing mental health awareness and community centered policing strategies.

Their support has been instrumental in shaping the analysis presented in this document on integrating psychosocial wellness within law enforcement systems in Uganda and South Africa.

## Introduction

Integrating psychosocial wellness into police work is crucial, especially in South Africa and Uganda. The law enforcement officers often face traumatic and stressful situations during operations in the communities. Police officers face numerous challenges that impact their mental health. These include: Witnessing violence, death, and human suffering leading to PTSD, anxiety, and depression. The Pressure to respond to emergencies, manage crowds, and make life-or-death decisions can cause chronic stress.

The long hours, shift work, and limited leave that disrupts personal relationships and overall well-being of officers; The Police culture emphasizing toughness, making it difficult for officers to seek help for mental health issues; The Inadequate access to mental health services, counseling, and peer support which exacerbates mental health problems; The exposure to hostility, abuse, or violence from the public leading to feelings of isolation

and burnout; The bureaucratic red tape, lack of support from superiors, and inadequate equipment contribute to frustration and stress.

These factors can contribute to mental health issues like PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse among police officers in Uganda and South Africa. However, although the law enforcement officers in South Africa and Uganda may be experiencing the same challenges that impact the mental situations of officers after operations, the two countries have different measures of addressing them.

### **The South African Police Services (SAPS) Approach on Community Policing and Mental Health**

The South African Police Services (SAPS) has the duty to prevent, combat and investigate crime, to protect and secure the inhabitants of the people and their property, and to uphold the law. South Africa's approach to community policing is centered on the concept of Community Policing Forums (CPFs) established in the 1990s to bridge the gap between law enforcement and communities post-apartheid<sup>1</sup>. The CPFs fosters communication, trust, and cooperation between residents and police, addressing crime through collaborative efforts.

The South Africa's policing approach to mental health involves a mix of strategies that address the complex issues surrounding mental illness and law enforcement<sup>2</sup>. These include:

1. De-escalation techniques Police officers receive during their training to safely manage situations involving individuals with mental health concerns.

<sup>1</sup> "(PDF) Community Policing In South Africa: Progress, Problems And Prospects."

<sup>2</sup> Limpopo Province, South Africa - PMC."

2. The Community-based approaches emphasizing cultural competency, mental health awareness, and building trust between law enforcement and local communities.
3. The SAPS acknowledges the trauma officers experience and works to address stigma around mental health, and encourages officers to seek help.
4. Police work with mental health professionals to develop effective response strategies and provide support to individuals in crisis.

The SAPS is also exploring innovative approaches, such as: Specialized teams that respond to mental health crises, provides support and connects individuals with services<sup>3</sup>. These efforts aim to improve law enforcement officer's responses to mental health situations, prioritizes officer well-being, and foster stronger community relationships.



*The police have a duty to prevent, combat and investigate crime, protect and secure the inhabitants of the people and their property, and to uphold the law.*

3 “Experiences of Mental Healthcare Users and Their Families When Interacting with SAPS: A Qualitative Study | Kabane | South African Journal of Psychiatry.”

## The Uganda Police Force (UPF) Approach on Community Policing and Mental Health

The Uganda Police Force (UPF) is the national police force of Uganda, established in 1906<sup>4</sup>. It's headed by the Inspector General of Police (IGP). UPF is mandated to protect the life, prevent and detect crimes, maintain law and order, and ensure overall public safety and security in Uganda. The Uganda Police Force (UPF) employs a community oriented approach to policing, prioritizing building trust and cooperation between law enforcement and the public. This approach is reflected in the vision of being **“a professional and people-centered police for a safe and secure society”**.

This community policing approach leads to significant improvements in public safety and trust in law enforcement. By working together, the police and community address issues like crime, poverty, and social inequality, creating a safer and more prosperous society for all.

The UPF proactive approach to community policing and mental health key initiatives include:

- 1. Community Policing Initiatives (CPI):** The UPF has intensified outreach programs, targeting vulnerable groups like women, children, boda boda riders, and businesspeople to educate them on maintaining a crime-free environment. The CPI is a cornerstone of Uganda's crime prevention strategy, aiming to build trust, enhance communication, and address issues at the grassroots level.
- 2. Mental Health Approach:** UPF has rolled out a five-year strategy to address mental health challenges among officers and the community<sup>5</sup>. This involves integrating mental health into other sectors, such as education and healthcare, and influencing policy to create an enabling

<sup>4</sup> About Uganda Police - Uganda Police Force.”

<sup>5</sup> Unveil Strategy to Defuse Mental Health Challenges among Its Officers - Watchdog Uganda.”

environment for mental health programs. The police are also working to reduce stigma around mental health and encourage officers to seek help.

These initiatives demonstrate the UPF's commitment to modernizing its approach to law enforcement and prioritizing community well-being.



*Community policing approach shows some positive results as increased crime reporting and citizen knowledge about the criminal justice system*

### **Mental Health Challenges in Police work.**

- a. Police are often called upon to address violent crimes in society. Many police officers become traumatized as they witness community violence, motor vehicle accidents and shootings, some of which have taken the life of their peers.
- b. Stress among the officers has led to an increase in police brutality. The lack of support from management, perceived unfair promotion opportunities, poor working conditions, alleged unfair disciplinary processes, poor interpersonal relationships with colleagues and low

salaries are among the organizational causes of stress in the Police Officers.

- c. Levels of stress in the officers are also related to family pressures at home, inadequate counselling services and insufficient social and emotional support.
- d. Gender, culture and race have a significant impact on their experience of stress. Police officers feel that their contributions to the organisation are valueless, but they are not able to discuss this with their supervisors because they are of a different gender or ethnic group.
- e. Although female numbers have increased, women are still under-represented.
- f. South Africa and Uganda have a patriarchal society; females at times have to deal with sexual harassment, public stereotypes and need to gain acceptance from male officers. The organizational culture inherent in policing is disadvantageous for female police officers.
- g. Police officers have a work environment that requires them to suppress their emotions related to shock, horror or sadness (emotional distance in order to properly deal with conflict and crime scenes)<sup>6</sup>.

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6 iran Govender, "Stress and Coping Mechanisms of Officers of the South African Police Service Based in Tzaneen, Limpopo Province, South Africa - PMC."





*Police Officers suppress their emotions related to shock, horror or sadness towards their work in public*

### **The Mental Health Stigma in Police Work.**

- a) A display of emotions could make an officer alienated from their working colleagues as they may be seen as too “soft and weak”.
- b) Officers are also expected to show compassion and understanding towards victims of crime and they constantly have to switch between being empathetic, emotionless and, in some cases, being overly assertive, which could lead to cognitive confusion.
- c) There's limited access to support for officers including limited resources, lack of trained professionals and concerns about confidentiality.

## The Impact of Mental Health performance and wellbeing.

One of the consequences related to the aforementioned issues is that there is a high divorce rate in the police force. All these factors lead to heightened stress levels<sup>7</sup>.

- a) The extreme cases of feeling isolated and despair can lead to suicide or possible famicide/suicide<sup>8</sup>.
- b) Some officers experience very high levels of stress and burnout, while others are less affected because they have the support of their families and possess inherent personality characteristics that reinforce their resilience.
- c) Officers who feel more supported are motivated in their work and more likely to show resilience. Differences in police ranks and stress intensity may differ in ranks and roles, some constables seem to suffer less stress than other ranks in the Police Force.
- d) Police officers with greater perceived work stress in the first year of police service have been found to show more severe depression.
- e) When there is a crime incident, whether violent or not, that requires police intervention, there's questions about the appropriateness of the police response.
- f) The questioning if the police are better prepared, did they react more quickly, acted more forcefully, and brought the situation under control are asked because of the harm they might have caused unnecessarily.
- g) Alcohol and Substance Abuse Intake increases.

<sup>7</sup> "Police Unveil Strategy to Defuse Mental Health Challenges among Its Officers - Watchdog Uganda."

<sup>8</sup> Daily Monitor, "Give More Psychosocial Support to Police Officers | Monitor."

## Recommended Initiatives for support of the Psychosocial Wellness in Police Work in South Africa and Uganda.

- a) **Mental Health Training:** Providing police officers with mental health and awareness programs to help with recognition and managing their own wellbeing and be sensitive to others.
- b) Peer support groups will provide a safe space for police officers to share their experiences and to also receive support from colleagues.
- c) **Access to Counselling:** Ensuring the access to confidential counseling services can help police officers to address the mental health issues and develop coping strategies.
- d) **Organizational Support:** Police can promote a culture of support and understanding and they can come with strategies to lobby funding for further external support.

## The Importance of Addressing Mental Health

- a) **Well-being of Officers:** This will improve the police officers well-beings job satisfaction and performance.
- b) **Public Safety:** Organizations can help ensure to ensure that officers are better equipped to respond to emergencies and make sound judgments.
- c) **Community trust:** They're more likely to build trust with the communities they serve, fostering a safer and more positive relationship between police and the public they serve.
- d) **Improves Advocacy:** Advocacy can lead to improvements in policy, legislation, and service development.

- e) **Mental Health and Training:** Equips officers with the knowledge and skills to recognize and respond to their own mental health needs.
- f) **Collaboration with mental health professionals:** They can provide expert advice and support during crisis interventions.

Collaboration between law enforcement and mental health professionals is vital. It bridges the gap between criminal justice and mental health care. This partnership can lead to more effective responses to mental health crises. Mental health professionals can provide training to officers. They can teach them how to recognize signs of mental illness and respond appropriately.

This knowledge can improve interactions with individuals in crisis. It starts with leadership acknowledging the importance of mental health. Leaders should promote open discussions about mental health and provide resources for officers. Departments can foster this culture by implementing mental health programs. These programs should be accessible and confidential. They should also provide ongoing support for officers dealing with stress and trauma.

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