

The wellbeing of prisoner officers: Psychosocial hazards, mental health and support needs

Dr Gail Kinman, Professor of Occupational Health Psychology, Birkbeck University of
London and Nottingham University

Dr Andrew Clements, Aston University



Working in prisons

- Prison officers are responsible for the security, supervision, training and rehabilitation of prisoners
- A challenging job: occupational, organisational and traumatising hazards
- Overcrowding and understaffing
 - 47% of UK prisons are officially overcrowded
 - Staffing reduced by 109% (2016/18) now recovering, but poor retention
- Volatile and potentially dangerous environments
 - Assaults on staff increased by 247% over 10 years, reduced in 2021
 - Prisoner self-harm, suicide, drug use and prisoner-on-prisoner attacks



Stressful work: the impact on wellbeing

- Prison officers are at high risk of:
 - Physical and mental health problems
 - Stress-related illness
 - Burnout, PTSD, vicarious trauma
 - Rumination; sleeping difficulties
 - Poor work-life balance; relationship breakdown
 - Coping via alcohol abuse

- Sickness absence and presenteeism are high



Clements & Kinman, 2020
Clements et al. 2020
Kinman & Clements, 2019
Walker et al., 2018
Spinaris et al. 2013

Two national studies: 2014 and 2020



- Samples: **2014 = 1,682; 2020 = 1,956** (mostly male and White British, working in public sector prisons)
- Benchmarking wellbeing (2014 and 2020)
 - Psychosocial hazards (HSE MS)
 - Mental health (GHQ-12)
 - Emotional exhaustion (MBI)
- Other issues: e.g.
 - Experiences of aggression, safety climate and hyper-vigilance
 - Work-life balance, sleep and recovery (rumination/detachment)
 - The wellbeing culture and support



Kinman, Clements & Hart, 2014
Kinman & Clements, 2020

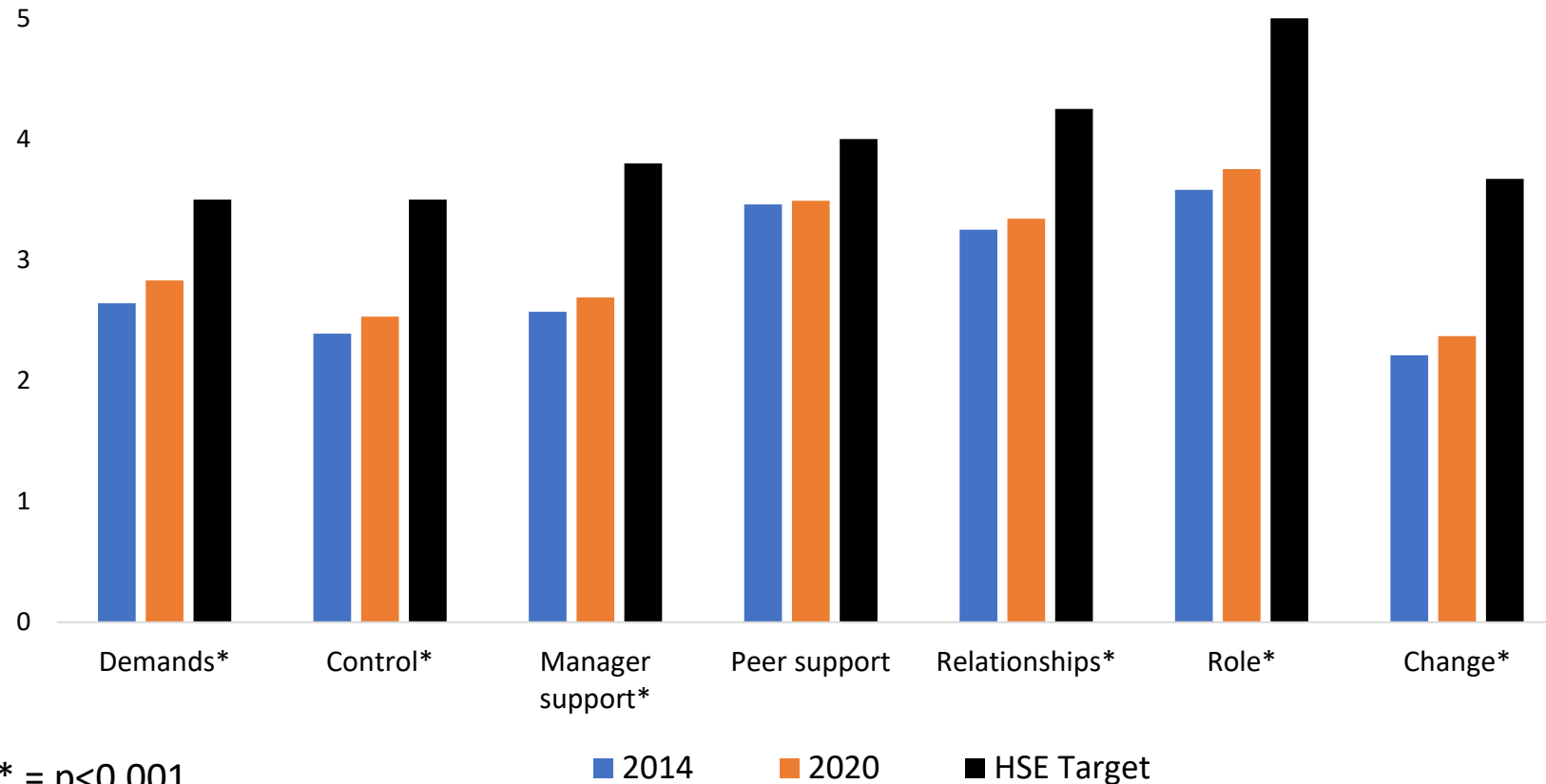
HSE Management Standards



- Measures employers' performance in preventing work-related stress
- A risk assessment approach: 6 areas of work activity with potential for psychological harm unless managed well
- Traffic light system, identifies priorities for change



Findings: HSE Management Standards (2014 and 2020)



- Some improvements for all hazards, **except for peer support**
- But 6/7 hazards still 'red' (**urgent action needed**)
- Peer support still 'yellow' (**clear need for improvement**)
- **Role, change and manager support** are key areas for attention

1 – 5: high scores represent higher levels of wellbeing

Findings: mental wellbeing

Work-related stress (2020 data)

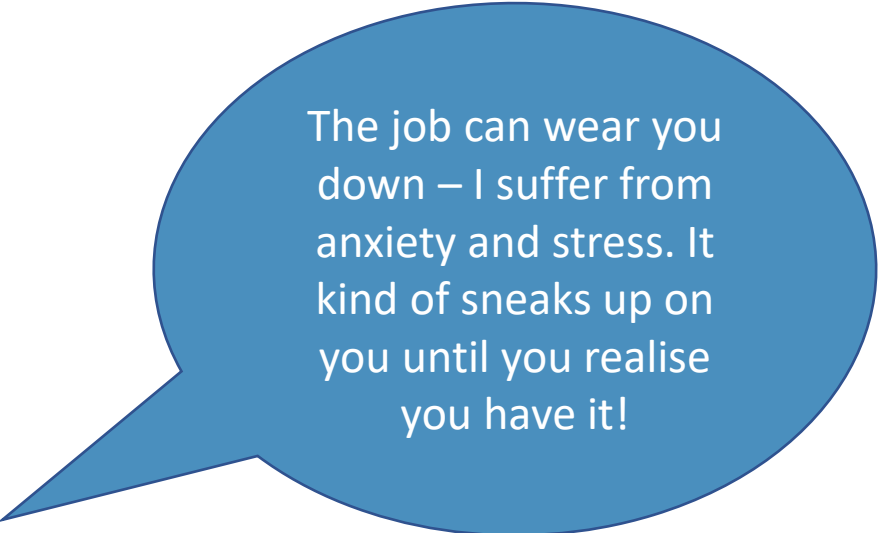
85% reported at least 'moderate' levels of stress, with 54% finding their job 'very' or 'extremely' stressful (no change over time)

Mental health (GHQ:12)

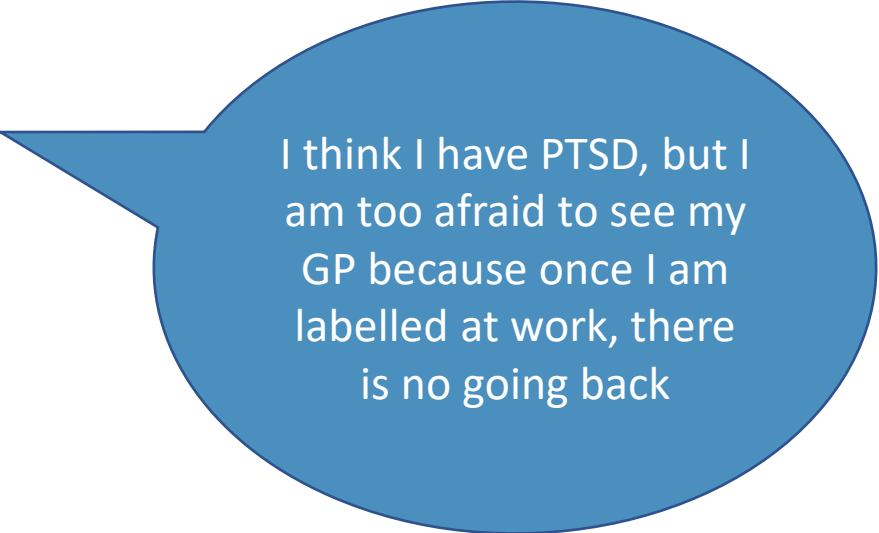
- Threshold score (caseness) = potential need for intervention
- Caseness lower in 2020 (72% to 69%) but mean score higher ($p < .001$)

Emotional exhaustion (MBI: 2020 data)

- 67% feel 'emotionally drained' at least 'once a week', 32% 'every day'
- Mean score lower in 2020 ($p < .001$) suggesting some improvement



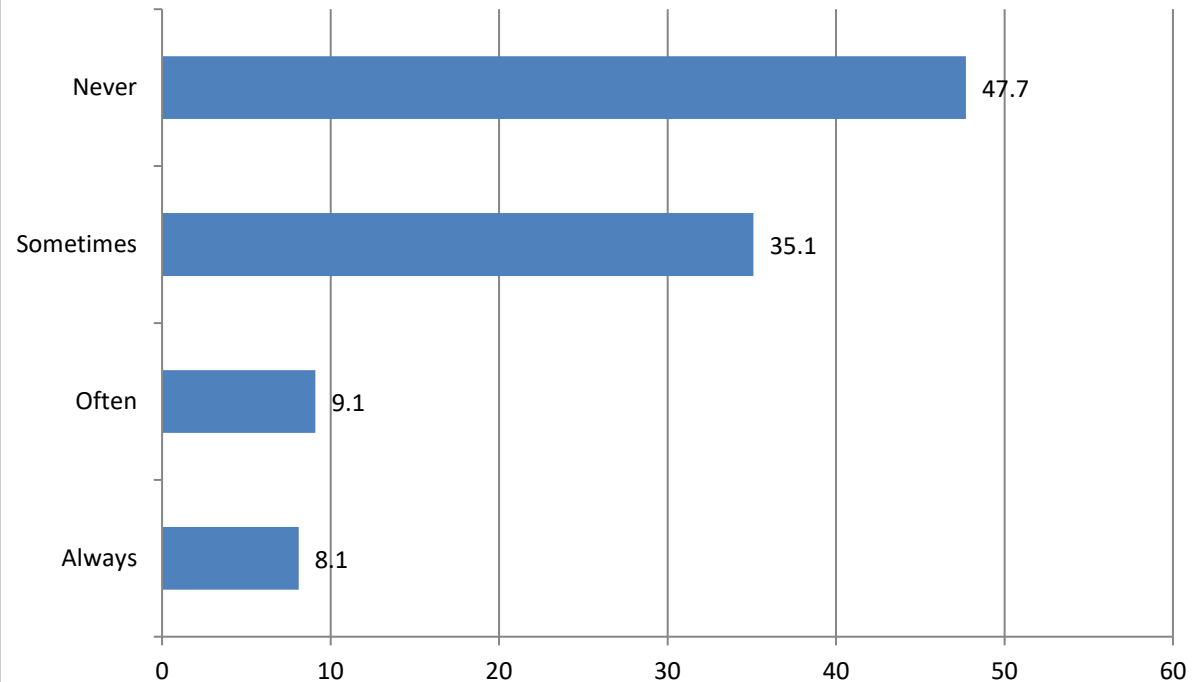
The job can wear you down – I suffer from anxiety and stress. It kind of sneaks up on you until you realise you have it!



I think I have PTSD, but I am too afraid to see my GP because once I am labelled at work, there is no going back

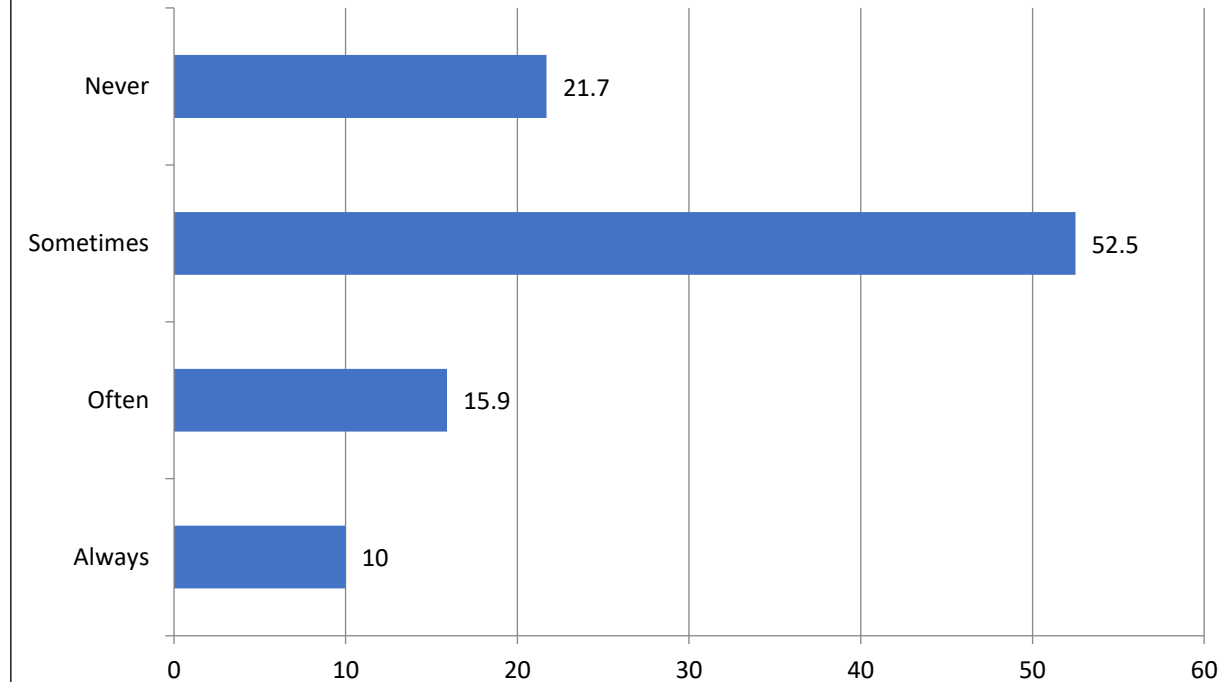
Findings: The stigma of stress (2020 data)

To what extent can you discuss stress-related problems with your manager %



% 'often' or 'always' increased slightly in 2020, but **48% can 'never' do so, and 35% only 'sometimes'**

To what extent can you discuss stress-related problems with your colleagues %



% 'often' or 'always' increased slightly in 2020 but **22% can 'never' do so, and 53% only 'sometimes'**

Findings: Sickness presenteeism (2020 data)

- 92% of POs work while sick at least 'sometimes' (> from 84% in 2014)
- 43% 'always' do so
- Organisational and individual factors (predict MH, performance and safety climate)
- Increases risk of health problems, sickness absence and errors
- Implications for the health and safety of prisoners as well as staff

Punitive systems
and management
pressure

Job insecurity

Staff shortages

Not letting
colleagues down

Duty/being
professional

Shame/fear of
disbelief

Key factors in supporting mental wellbeing

*Protective factors
(organisational)*
Optimum staffing
Multi-level support (formal and informal)
Perceptions of fairness and justice
Open stress and support culture

*Protective factors
(individual)*
Job satisfaction (colleagues)
Effective self care
Work-life balance
Detachment/Sleep/Recovery
Taking sick leave when needed



Demands
Relationships
Role
Support
Control
Change

Experiences of aggression
Poor safety climate
Need for vigilance
Prisoner drug use

Mental health
problems



Priorities for change:

- **Adequate staffing levels** needed; recruitment and retention concerns
- **Enhanced support** and increased awareness of what is available
- **De-stigmatisation** of stress and mental health problems
- **Help for work-life balance**, reducing rumination and ‘switching off’
- **Presenteeism**: awareness of long-term vs short-term operational imperatives
- **A need for multi-level interventions** not just individually-focused



Further reading (contact us for copies of articles)

gail.kinman@bbk.ac.uk; Andrew Clements <a.clements1@aston.ac.uk>

- Kinman, G. & Clements, A.J. (2022, in press). Sickness presenteeism in prison officers: risk factors and implications for wellbeing and productivity. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*
- Kinman, G. & Clements, A.J. (2021) New psychoactive substances, safety and mental health in prison officers, *Occupational Medicine*, 71 (8), 346-350
- Clements, A.J. & Kinman, G. (2021) Job demands, organizational justice, and emotional exhaustion in prison officers, *Criminal Justice Studies*, 34 (4), 441-458
- Clements, A.J. & Kinman, G. (2020) A forgotten profession: The need to invest in the wellbeing of prison officers, in P. Birch & L.A. Sicard (Eds.) *Prisons and Community Corrections: Critical Issues and Emerging Controversies* (pp86-99), Oxon: Routledge
- Clements, A.J., Kinman, G. & Hart, J. (2020) Stress and wellbeing in prison officers, in R. Burke and S. Pignata (Eds.) *Handbook of Research on Stress and Well-being in the Public Sector* (pp137-151), Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing
- Kinman, G., Clements, A.J., & Hart, J. (2019) "When are you coming back?" Presenteeism in UK Prison Officers, *The Prison Journal*, 99 (3), 363-383
- Kinman, G., Clements, A., & Hart, J. (2016) Work-related wellbeing in UK prison officers: A benchmarking approach, *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, 9 (3), 290-307
- Kinman, G., Clements, A.J., Hart, J. (2017) Working conditions, work-life conflict, and wellbeing in U.K. prison officers: The role of affective rumination and detachment, *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 44 (2), 226-239
- Kinman, G., Clements, A., & Hart, J. (2017) Job demands, resources and mental health in UK prison officers, *Occupational Medicine*, 67 (6), 456-460
- Kinman, G., Clements, A. & Hart, J. (2016) Work-life balance and wellbeing in UK prison officers: the role of recovery experiences. *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, 44, 2, 226-239
- Kinman, G., Clements, A. & Hart, J. (2016) Work-related wellbeing in UK prison officers: A benchmarking approach. *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, 9, 3, 290-307