

Brief Report: Mental health outcomes and social experiences of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses in the British Post Office Scandal

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Background

The University of Exeter and Towson University conducted a research survey to quantify the mental health outcomes and social experiences of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses involved in the British Post Office Scandal.¹ The harms caused to victims of the Post Office Scandal have been revealed in the recent Human Impact Hearings in the Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry – including financial stress, unemployment, ongoing mental health problems, and social and relationship breakdowns. In this survey, we sought to quantify these mental health outcomes and social experiences of victims of the Post Office Scandal using standardised measures to investigate the scale of the issues.

Findings and Conclusions

Informed by previous research investigating the mental health outcomes of exonerees wrongfully convicted of crimes they did not commit,² we surveyed 101 sub-postmasters and subpostmistresses to quantify the harms they had experienced. These individuals completed measures of posttraumatic stress symptoms,³ depressive symptoms⁴, posttraumatic cognitions,⁵ and perceived social support,⁶ as well as provided information about their involvement with the Post Office Scandal, their demographic information, employment status, any guilty pleas or

¹ Growsns, B., Kukucka, J., Moorhead, R., & Helm, R.K. (forthcoming – in preparation). The British Post Office Scandal: Mental health and social experiences of wrongfully convicted and wrongfully accused victims.

² Kukucka, J., Horodyski, A. M., & Dardis, C. M. (2022). The Exoneree Health and Life Experiences (ExHaLE) study: Trauma exposure and mental health among wrongfully convicted individuals. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 28(3), 387–399.

³ Blevins, C.A., Weathers, F.W., Davis, M.T., Witte, T.K., & Domino, J.L. (2015). The Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5): Development and initial psychometric evaluation. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 28(6), 489-498.

⁴ Levine, S. Z. (2013). Evaluating the seven-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale short-form: A longitudinal US community study. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 48(9), 1519-1526.

⁵ Wells, S. Y., Morland, L. A., Torres, E. M., Kloezeman, K., Mackintosh, M. A., & Aarons, G. A. (2019). The development of a brief version of the Posttraumatic Cognitions Inventory (PTCI-9). *Assessment*, 26(2), 193-208.

⁶ Zimet, G. D., Powell, S. S., Farley, G. K., Werkman, S., & Berkoff, K. A. (1990). Psychometric characteristics of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 55(3-4), 610-617.

admissions of liability, length of incarceration (if any), and amount of financial compensation received.

Our results suggest that victims of the Post Office Scandal experience mental illness symptoms at worryingly high levels – compared to the general population, and also other high-risk populations. We found that the majority of respondents (67.3%) met the clinical cut-off for post-traumatic stress symptoms (67%) and depressive symptoms (60.4%), and also reported high levels of posttraumatic negative cognitions (e.g., ‘people can’t be trusted’ or ‘I have no future’).⁷ Importantly, these outcomes did not differ between those who were or were not criminally convicted. These estimates of posttraumatic stress and depressive symptoms are similar – and in some cases higher – than those found in studies investigating the mental health outcomes of exonerees internationally (e.g., the USA and Canada),^{2,8} and are far higher than estimates for depression and posttraumatic stress disorder in the UK general population.⁹ For comparison, it is estimated that 4.8% and 3.7% of UK Armed Forces personnel experience PTSD and major depressive disorder¹⁰ and 22% and 47% respectively of frontline health workers in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹¹

Additional analyses revealed levels of mental health harms did not differ appreciably between individuals who had a criminal conviction and individuals who had been investigated but never convicted or found liable, nor between individuals who had and had not received financial compensation for the injustice they experienced, nor between those with full-time employment or those employed part-time or unemployed.

Overall, these results suggest that all respondents in our study involved in the Post Office Scandal face significant consequences in terms of mental health and social experiences and that these harms may be just as severe in those who have not received a criminal conviction as those who have. These results are particularly concerning given the high rates of posttraumatic stress and depressive symptoms seen in this population and highlight the clear need for victims of the Post Office Scandal to be provided with adequate support to address the harms they have experienced.

⁷ Average score of 57.9 ($SD = 18.8$) on the Posttraumatic Cognitions Inventory.

⁸ Grounds, A. (2004). Psychological consequences of wrongful conviction and imprisonment. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 46(2), 165–182.

⁹ Craig, R., Fuller, E., & Mindell, J. (Eds.). (2015). *Health Survey for England 2014: Health, social care and lifestyles*. NatCen Social Research.

¹⁰ Iversen, A. C., van Staden, L., Hughes, J. H., Browne, T., Hull, L., Hall, J., Greenberg, N., Rona, R. J., Hotopf, M., & Wessely, S. (2009). The prevalence of common mental disorders and PTSD in the UK military: Using data from a clinical interview-based study. *BMC Psychiatry*, 9(1), 1–12.

¹¹ Greene, T., Harju-Seppänen, J., Adeniji, M., Steel, C., Grey, N., Brewin, C. R., Bloomfield, M. A., & Billings, J. (2021). Predictors and rates of PTSD, depression and anxiety in UK frontline health and social care workers during COVID-19. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 12(1), 1–11.