

National Police Uniform and Equipment Survey

Is your uniform fit-for-purpose? Is it comfortable? Has wearing the police uniform and equipment ever affected your physical or mental health? We want to know!



Lancaster University launches the first-ever national police uniform and equipment survey on the 1st July 2024 and will be distributed to 200,000 police officers and staff.

Evidence of poor workwear designs is widespread across various emergency service occupations and has highlighted the serious medical implications of overlooking problems personal protective equipment and clothing, particularly for women. Dr Camilla De Camargo, a lecturer and policing researcher from Lancaster University, explored ill-fitting and uncomfortable uniforms in her doctoral thesis in 2017, and found police uniforms were originally tailored by men, for men, and centred around heteronormative masculine body shapes, with current iterations still not fit for purpose. But subsequent evidence shows that some current standard issue uniforms are not fit for men either.

In 2023, Dr De Camargo developed “When the Uniform Doesn’t Fit,” a project examining the significant and dangerous impacts of poorly fitted police uniforms on performance, health and safety, morale, and psychosocial well-being. After conducting women-only focus groups in five police forces, initial data analysis revealed issues with all parts of the uniform for women, particularly trousers and stab vests. The research identified short- and long-term medical implications for women, including the development and worsening of disabilities, chronic health conditions, mental health challenges, and symptoms of neurodivergence. Specifically, severe physical consequences such as cysts, which could necessitate mastectomies, were uncovered. Additionally, ill-fitting uniforms exacerbate musculoskeletal issues, leading to chronic pain and an increased risk of injuries.

Additionally, ‘women’s issues’ in emergency services are often hidden and silenced, particularly when they involve ‘embarrassing’ and stigmatized health conditions such as thrush, bloating, UTIs, endometriosis, psoriasis, skin tags, and breast fistulas, all of which were documented as being caused or worsened by standard-issue uniforms.

These findings underscore the critical need for appropriate uniform designs that cater to the diverse physical and emotional needs of both male and female police officers. Similarly, there are reports of men similarly suffering with crushed testicles, skin conditions, and the exacerbation of neurodivergent symptoms such as irritating labels and poorly-placed seams amongst many other problems.

Voluntary resignations in policing across England and Wales is at an all-time high, so retention means prioritising well-being and inclusive practices. This project focuses on the social aspects of those working in policing, and while some research acknowledges the ongoing police uniform issues, there has been little meaningful effort to rectify these identified problems or offer viable solutions. A significant case illustrating this is that of Rebecca Kalam, a female firearms inspector, who filed an employment tribunal against the Chief Constable of West Midlands Police in July 2023. Mrs. Kalam cited direct and indirect discrimination, including being provided with ill-fitting, unfit-for-purpose *men's* uniform. Mrs. Kalam was subsequently awarded £820,000 in compensation for pain, suffering, loss of quality of life, and future loss of earnings, which underscores the pitfalls of failing to proactively address significant uniform issues. Addressing such concerns is not only vital under strategic Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) priorities but also crucial to fulfilling legal obligations.

While the focus groups talked to women initially, the research informed a survey design aimed at all genders, and all police staff and officers, in collaboration with the Police Federation of England and Wales, and the National Uniform Portfolio as part of the NPCC. This work has had input from and has been supported by the Home Office, The Open University, UNISON, the Superintendent's Association, and Blue Light Commercial. The resulting dataset will be used to inform future national decision-making about uniform design, usability, and safety for all officers and staff. This is an exciting opportunity for uniform-wearers to have their voices heard and directly impact change to uniform policies.