

From active police duty to civilian life: The role of peer support

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the contribution of peer support to the mental health and wellbeing of police veterans. Thematic analysis of interview data with veterans ($n = 7$), partners ($n = 1$) and veteran peer support officers ($n = 10$) captures the participant experience. Two key themes were integral to the contribution peer support makes to veteran wellbeing. First, the centrality of police identity and the importance of belonging to a supportive police community. Second, the need for hope and possibilities in transitioning from policing to civilian life. Social work services and trained peers provide veterans with a road map for re-building a life and identity away from the force.

Keywords

Police veterans, peer support, identity, mental health, hope, community

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Introduction

Encounters with family violence, physical assault, armed and dangerous offenders and death are part of the everyday work for many police officers worldwide (Page and Jacobs, 2011; Anderson et al., 2015; Jetelina et al., 2020). The effect of repeated exposure to potentially traumatic and critical incidents, personal relationship difficulties, organisational climate and workplace stressors, can lead police to experience high rates of burn out and poor mental health (Carleton et al., 2019; Parker, 2015). Although police services have increased activities to support the mental health and wellbeing of their serving personnel (Muir et al., 2018; McCreary and Thompson, 2006; Pasillas et al., 2006), the rate at which serving members take up mental health services is variable and influenced by factors such as gender, role, geographic location and degree of confidence in the organisation and or service provider (Jetelina et al., 2020).

A 2017 Australian study examined the prevalence and severity of mental health conditions in the police workforce in the state of Victoria (Muir et al., 2018). Survey data from 5884 respondents indicated that mental health conditions affected a large proportion of the police workforce and had a negative impact on their work and social lives. A national Australian survey of the mental health and wellbeing of employees, former employees and volunteers in the police and emergency services (Beyond Blue Ltd, 2018) found that while the majority of the 21,014 respondents experienced positive mental health and wellbeing, police and emergency services personnel were at higher risk of mental health conditions when compared with the Australian population in general, and other sectors such as the Australian Defence Force. Survey findings showed that former employees had high rates of PTSD and psychological distress, low levels of resilience and 'were much less likely to receive high levels of social support compared with current employees' (Beyond Blue Ltd, 2018: 56).

In the Australian context, police and emergency services agencies are not funded to provide support for former employees after they leave the service. This is in direct contrast to the experience of working in the Australian Defence Force where through the Department of Veterans' Affairs, veterans of the Australian Defence Force are provided with a range of supports and services long after they are discharged from active duty. This paper reports on ways in which a small community led peer support program contributes to the mental health and wellbeing of police veterans living in the state of Victoria, Australia. It is anticipated that findings from this study will inform the future development and national expansion of the peer support program for police veterans thus answering the call for enhanced support for post service employees and retirees from the police and emergency services workforce (Beyond Blue Ltd, 2018).

The study setting

Police Veterans Victoria (PVV) is a not-for-profit organisation established in 2019 to replace a volunteer run Retired Peer Support Program (2014–2019). PVV is governed by a Board of Management, Victoria Police fund a Social Worker/Program Coordinator. Police Veterans Victoria aims to improve the mental health of Victoria Police Veterans and their

families; its underlying philosophy is based upon the belief that individuals who have shared experiences of life issues can better relate to other people trying to deal with similar issues. Police Veterans Victoria anecdotally estimates there are more than 15,000 police veterans in Victoria alone with numbers across Australia clearly much higher.

Peer support

The peer support program was established in recognition of the preference many serving police officers have for receiving support from peers (Page and Jacobs, 2011). Veteran Peer Support Officers (VPSOs) are trained to provide confidential support and referral services to police veterans who may be experiencing mental health issues including PTSD, depression, anxiety, social isolation, alcohol and substance abuse. Although not qualified counsellors, they are well supported and trained by the PVV social worker and have access to various resources including psychologists, chaplaincy and other services provided by external agencies such as Victoria Police, EAP and Blue Space – a mental health and wellbeing website created for current and veteran Victoria Police employees and their immediate families.

Evidence in terms measuring the effectiveness of peer support programs requires further research (Jones et al., 2021), however, existing studies indicate the benefits in terms of the importance of the provision of social support to assist with the impact and processing of workplace trauma experiences (Jones et al., 2021). The PVV program is based upon the ‘Open Arms – Veterans and Families Counselling’ program which serves as a benchmark (<https://www.openarms.gov.au/get-support/community-and-peer-program>) for the current program.

Peer support is offered to eligible veterans after a psychosocial assessment and mental health screening check is completed by the PVV social worker. Since 2019 PVV has trained 20 (plus supporting an additional 31 trained via VicPol’s Peer program) VPSOs and supported more than 250 veterans and their family members. In 2021, PVV was endorsed by the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police.

Study aims

This study investigates the Peer Support program provided by PVV. Specifically, it aims to increase understanding of the role peer support may play in the transition from active police duty to civilian life.

Methods

Research design

A qualitative, exploratory methodology reflecting an interpretive approach (Green and Thorogood, 2018) was designed to understand participant experience of the peer support program. The research was jointly developed by social work researchers, social work students and PVV employees.

Participants

A combination of purposive, convenience and snowball sampling (Patton, 2005) was used to recruit the three participant groups contributing to this research study: veterans, partners of veterans or VPSOs and VPSOs. The study was promoted in two ways: (1) via information posted on the PVV website enabling direct contact with the research team and (2) via direct email from the peer support program coordinator to the VPSOs, police veterans and their partners. Prospective participants expressing interest in the research received detailed information about the study via an email or telephone call from a member of the research team (AV). A second contact was made with prospective participants to gain consent to participate and arrange an interview. Participants gave verbal consent at the commencement of the interview or signed and returned a written consent form prior to interview. The voluntary nature of participation was explicitly communicated, and people were advised that they could change their mind or withdraw at any time. They were also advised that their choice to not participate or to withdraw participation would not in any way affect their relationship with PVV staff or services.

Data collection and analysis

A semi structured interview guide was used with all participant groups and questions explored participant experiences of receiving/providing peer support. We were particularly interested in learning about the ways in which the peer support program contributed to participant transition from active duty and how it differed from the types of support people had received in the past. The telephone interviews were conducted by two researchers (AV and TK) and took place between September and October 2021. They ranged in length from 30–60 min and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interview data was analysed thematically in keeping with the techniques described by Braun and Clark (2006). The process was inductive and began with two researchers (AV and TK) and social work students, rereading the transcripts to increase familiarity with the data and noting ideas as preliminary codes. Codes and field notes were discussed with the research team and themes and sub themes generated. The final themes were decided based upon their frequency or saliency. Importantly, the role of interpretation throughout the process of analysis by the researchers is acknowledged. The study was approved by the University Ethics Committee (HRE21-060).

Findings

Participant characteristics

Ten VPSOs, seven police veterans and one partner of a VPSO took part in the study. Of the 10 VPSOs, eight identified as male, and two as female; the length of time in the force ranged from 10 to 44 years with the average length of service being 23 years; three of the VPSOs had been providing peer support since 2014, three between 3 and 5 years and four for less than 12 months.

Of the seven veterans, six identified as male, one female; the length of time in the police force ranged from eight to 36.5 years; four were retired on ill-health grounds; three veterans have been receiving peer support for more than five years, one for 18 months and three for less than 12 months. One female identifying partner of a VPSO participated in the study – her partner was a serving police officer for 30 years. All study participants spoke English at home, none identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and they ranged in age from 31 to 73 years.

Key themes

Two key themes emerged as integral to participant experiences of the PVV Peer Support Program while capturing the complex and multi-layered experiences associated with leaving ‘the job’. The first, *Identity and Belonging*, shows the ways in which the peer support program understands the centrality of policing to veteran identity and recognises and recreates a sense of belonging to a supportive, trusted police community. The second, *Transition to a New Identity* shows how through respectful conversation, the peer support program acknowledges losses associated with leaving the force, recognises contributions and service in the police force, and creates a sense of hope and possibility in the transition from active police service to civilian life.

Identity and belonging

‘I miss, and you probably hear this hundreds of times, the identity if that makes sense. Yeah everyone says, ‘I’m a copper’, you know, that’s it. (P9).

Overwhelmingly, the participants in this study referred to the great loss of identity experienced upon leaving the police force. However, when serving, identification with the policing role is key to operating in a difficult, demanding and taxing context where members are exposed to a wide range of potentially traumatic circumstances including violence, death and sorrow.

It’s because, like, when a policeman goes to work, like, it’s- people think that it’s, like, you’re there to pick up little old ladies across the street and pick up babies and whatever and then, you know, do the odd fatal accident or whatever. But it’s- you’re technically going to war every day because you’re never- like within five- from five minutes of sitting there having- I’ll use the old American analogy, eating donuts and drinking coffee to being hyper vigilant at a siege situation, a domestic situation, like, an armed person, whatever it is, right. So, the ups and downs are so dramatic. (P17).

Working as a team and relying on other members is essential for the successful and professional discharge of the role. Policing as part of a team entails being supportive, alert, decisive, vigilant, adept at assessing and configuring information and prepared for any circumstance or outcome. Participants told us that the intensity of the work impacts the

nature and speed at which relationships are formed on the job: *'It's just a different, you know, it's just a different form of connection and... it does create a fairly loyal and strong bond between police members.'* (P3). The nature of the work, coupled with what participants described as life changing experiences enhanced workplace bonds.

So you do face- and usually you're not called around because people are having a good time it's because something's gone wrong, ... it's delivering death messages it's those sorts of things ... there's no level of training or, you know, reading books that can prepare you for those things so you need to experience them and so you're experiencing these really life changing moments with someone else and it might be someone you've worked with a lot or it might be someone you worked with for the first time but that's left an impression on you that whole situation because of the, you know, the situations you've been through with them. (P3).

Much of police work is physically onerous and impactful on the emotional and social wellbeing of serving members. All participants were convinced that policing was different to other first responders: *'The vast majority of the population don't ever experience or see {what police see} so you can't help but, you know, be impacted by that.'* (P13). This challenging workplace context creates a strong sense of belonging to the 'blue family' where debriefing and shared experiences cement relationships and ultimately provides ongoing support in high risk, unpredictable and constantly changing daily duties: *'...The camaraderie's strong. I mean it has to be... you've got to know you've got someone- or your offsider's got your back.'* (P13).

A lot of people talk about the police force, it's a family, it's a big blue family and it's true, it's 100% true and no matter when you work there or when you leave, the term actually (VPSO's name) used with me once was 'you'll always bleed blue'. Which is true..... one of the hardest things for me when I retired was that I felt I lost that. I wasn't part of that anymore. (P2).

Leaving the force severed connection to the 'blue family' and veterans and VPSOs reported grieving the loss of belonging to a supportive community.

So, you know, I'm having to rebuild relationships and friendships and stuff like that and it goes back to always that switch, once you're out, you know, the phone doesn't ring. Just because you'd spent forty years in the job and you retired, once you've had your sendoff you're out. (P7).

Some felt cast aside, devalued and let down by the organisation that many considered central to their lives. All participants spoke of the emotional healing gained from being able to reconnect with the 'police family' through peer support and reframe past experiences in a more holistic way. The value of a shared lived experience was central to this.

The police culture is unique and there are, you know, certain experiences that you go through and I think having a police veteran or and, you know, a former police officer, it earns you a certain level of respect and appreciation for your- for my background and my history and being able to understand the, you know, the separate or the individual or the specific sorts of experiences that you encounter.(P3).

For a workforce trained to be suspicious, trust is crucial for reconnection to a community.

And police, because of the work that we did we're very sceptical, we're very cynical. I remember a comment made by my mother many, many years ago that she said: 'you've become dreadfully cynical since you've been a policeman'. And you do, because you - like you see the nasty side of people, you see the devious side of people. So there's not what might have otherwise just been blind trust with anyone and everyone- no longer exists. (P13).

Trust is facilitated by shared understandings of the highs and lows of police work, a common language, and similar experiences: '*there's a level of trust that comes with them connecting with an ex-police member*'. (P3) and knowing the job '*I think it's just being like-minded and having a like-minded in like, a like career*'. (P11). The easy ability to share stories of work with former police was often not found in relationships with non-police friends: '*telling them about my day they'd be horrified. You couldn't tell them half the things that you'd done or half the things that you'd been part of*'. (P2). All participants described the huge impact policing has on family life. This at times was because of the oft described consuming nature of the job '*...it's just a uniquely intrinsic part of someone's life because you live it 24/7 ...I was a policeman, that defined me and, you know, me losing my job probably saved my marriage because I was- I loved the job more than I loved my family*'. (P7). For others, it was because of the traumatic nature of the work.

A simple example is the first cot death that I went to, my wife was pregnant. You know, so then what did you take home from that? You went to a cot death, saw the trauma of the parents, dealt with the process at work. But then when you went home and then when you had a kid you couldn't sleep. (P17).

The one participating partner of a VPSO told us that it is the family who '*see the raw emotions that come in the front door or the blank affect that comes into-through front door ...the ups and downs of emotions you might say ...*'. (P5).

Transition to a new identity

Because like for me I'm thirty-one so I retired at thirty years old and I, - that was never part of the plan. I was never- it was never gonna, you know, and people say now if they find out I'm retired they go 'geeze, you're living the dream, you got to retire at 30'. No, absolutely not,

this is not the dream. No, this is not the dream this was not the plan this was not how it was supposed to happen. (P2).

As they used to say 'how many jobs want someone that can shoot at centre body mass and drive at 200 km an hour and fight? (P17).

Re-establishing an identity away from the police force is paramount to future well-being and regaining a sense of purpose. A lack of confidence in their own capabilities since leaving the force was a crucial issue for several veterans and having peer support and validation contributed appreciably to enhanced self-esteem and self-worth. In turn, the raised confidence in self-esteem and self-worth contributed to building capacity to investigate alternative futures for themselves and their families, as well as progress towards the resolution of past impacts. The reconnection to a supportive community, reinstatement of a sense of worth and acknowledgement of their contributions and service in the police force created hope and possibilities for transition to civilian life.

Many veterans discussed having little understanding of how their skills could be transferable or how to navigate this life change: *'I think a lot of coppers feel trapped that the-they feel like they're, they can't get out of the job because they're not suited for anything else'*. (P9). Through mutually respectful peer discussion veterans were assisted to broaden perceptions and reframe previous police work experience and the associated skill sets, in order to consider possibilities.

One of the first conversations I had with this person {veteran} he said 'well what would I do I've got no other skill the- or, you know, training' and I said 'well neither did I' and I just talked about, you know, the police ... about the skills that it does bring that are transferable and what they might want to do to get some experience. (P3).

Low mental health literacy and a fear of stigma was addressed by VPSO's helping to normalise veteran's experiences and providing a bridge for accessing appropriate health and wellbeing services. They were able to do this because of their knowledge of police organisational culture.

Whilst the police force has made, you know, big gains and huge steps over the last few years, a couple of years especially in regards to mental health, the people that I speak to that are still police officers say that there's a lot of talk but really the culture hasn't changed and so that, you know, if you are suffering from some mental health issues it's probably not going to go well for you if you're looking for promotion to become a detective or for, you know, wanting secondments to different areas so people tend to keep it hidden from other police member." (P3).

Like the veterans, most VPSO's identified positive gains from their participation in the PVV peer support program. Veteran Peer Support Officers described personal mental health benefits and valued gaining the skills to navigate support services to help others: *'I don't have all the answers and ...I can't go and find the professional*

help but that's where (Social Worker) and her network come into play'. (P15). Interestingly, all highlighted the informal nature of the program as a strength in enabling veterans to access services and supports especially when past experiences of doing so have been negative or difficult. 'I could call her at 10 o'clock at night if I needed to. So, it's nice because in terms of formal supports and that sort of thing it's not that available'. (P2).

Discussion

This study confirms the value of peer support (Page and Jacobs, 2011) in assisting police veterans to reconnect with a trusted community, access appropriate supports and re-build a life and identity away from the police force. Serving police members are exposed to a range of stressful and potentially traumatic events daily (Maheshkumar, 2016) and mental health concerns are a major risk factor (Muir et al., 2018; Beyond Blue Ltd, 2018; Jetelina et al., 2020) into the future. A key part of the peer support service offered by PVV is a well-established network of appropriate referrals alongside counselling support provided by the social worker. Jones et al. (2021) found in their evaluation of a reintegration program (Edmonton Police Services Reintegration Program) following work-based injury, that a holistic approach which includes peer support alongside a team of health professionals is essential (2021: 161). Managing and regulating past trauma experiences assists veterans to effectively transition to civilian life, build mental health literacy and manage the potential long-term effects in their personal lives long after leaving the police force.

Participants described the value of the mutual respect and regard provided by the PVV peer support program whereby shared, non-judgemental, and safe spaces helped to restore support relationships and social networks and allow for more complex and nuanced understandings of previous service and associated trauma. Participants believed that this assistance has aided and strengthened their quality of life and most veterans spoke to the positive impact of peer support on their social and family relationships. The benefit of peer support from those who share understandings of the impact (peers) arising from work place trauma injury and who possess genuine internal and external qualities such as authenticity, honesty, patience, humbleness, intelligence, empathy, credibility, courage, openness to learning and kind-heartedness as well as being 'comfortable engaging in tough conversations while still being vulnerable; able to engage and build trust (rapport); ... able to advocate for the injured officer' has been cited as important components in the selection of peer supporters (Jones et al., 2021: 161).

The model of service delivery provided by PVV is affirmed by guidance from the Australian Government Department of Health (2019) which makes recommendations in relation to the support of better mental health outcomes via the employment of multi-disciplinary peer support workers who provide person centred, recovery orientated and trauma informed care. Additionally, the trauma informed care and support provided by PVV is extended to families of veterans and is recognised as an important aspect of service delivery for veteran optimal wellbeing (Drebing et al., 2018; Norris et al., 2018) as well as building a social support network (Dept. of Veteran Affairs, 2013; Open Arms: Veterans

and Families Counselling, nd). Indeed, the provision of therapeutic support through a peer group model has been shown to be an effective service model delivery (Van Hasselt et al., 2018), particularly in terms of the value placed on its relational features (Pahk and Baek, 2021).

A key issue emerging from the study was the challenge for veterans to transition from police service, with its distinct stamp, to 'civilian' life. The PVV peer support program enables veterans to explore how their skillset is relevant and transferable while providing essential links with industries and careers. Peer support has assisted veterans to create new futures and reconstructed identities and contributed to veterans increasing sense of worthiness and consequently wellbeing. The provision of adequate resources required to assist transitions from service has been recognised as an important factor for creating new identities, interests and career opportunities (Tufano, 2018; Carney et al., 2021). Increases in social connection and social support as experienced in a peer support program model (Pahk and Baek, 2021) is a material benefit aiding the exploration of future career and interest options.

Participants in this study believed that police work is distinctive and that the impact of the work may be distinguished from other similar professions who are first responders (Arble et al., 2018). Unlike the defence forces, the impact of police work is much less well appreciated in Australia. Social and environmental influences are a major cause for distress (Snow, 2013), and elevating knowledge of the nature and extent of the issue in public spheres is an important aspect of the advocacy role of PVV that will ensure ongoing attention and enable social and financial resources to be directed to maintaining and enhancing police veterans' wellbeing. The inclusion of public advocacy into the PVV service model delivery is well-recognised and recommended as a crucial function for health professionals in raising mental health literacy in our society and influencing policy decisions for adequate resourcing (Alexander and Allo, 2021).

Limitations

We acknowledge that this exploratory study has limitations and the size of the overall sample and length of operation of PVV mean that care must be taken when generalising findings. Follow up interviews to allow for a more nuanced understanding and further research with a greater number of veterans and family members from female/other identifying genders, and diverse cultural backgrounds will increase understanding of the value of peer support in improving wellbeing for police veterans and their families.

Although the experiences of receiving and providing support are examined, the study sought to explore the benefits of the program more generally. Research which delineates these aims to deeply investigate these intersecting aspects would contribute to more nuanced and full understandings.

Further research is encouraged to widen the sample size and potentially include a greater diversity of respondents especially culturally, and to increase the number of participants to allow for quantitative analysis alongside qualitative approaches.

Conclusion

A police life is hugely rewarding but for some, the impact on their mental health and wellbeing is significant and largely unacknowledged. That impact and a lack of understanding and support remains a hidden tragedy in our society and change is needed.

The PVV peer support program recognises the importance of police service and police identity and provides a reconnection to a community of support. A community of peers can assist police veterans to transition from active duty, access appropriate supports and re-build a life and identity away from the police force. Significantly, the PVV peer support program recognises that police work is distinctive from other first responders and social and financial resources are needed to maintain and enhance veterans' wellbeing following police service.

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