

Working Paper 8

Briefing Paper: Exploring the Mental Health and Wellbeing of the Families of those Wrongly Accused in the Post Office Scandal

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Background

This paper discusses mental health issues.¹

In 2022, the project conducted a survey of former subpostmasters (SPM) and other Post Office (PO) employees² to research the impacts of the PO Scandal on those primary victim/survivors.³

In this paper, we report a follow-up study, with the aim of better understanding the **ripple-effect** of harms from the scandal. Exploratory in nature, it examines how the scandal affected and is affecting the lives of those who could be classed as **'secondary victims'** – this includes children of former SPMs who are now aged over 18 years old and the (former) partners of a primary victim/survivor, as well as other family members.

The myriad and complex harms caused to those caught in the net of victimisation from the scandal have been raised during the Human Impact Hearings in the PO Horizon IT Inquiry.⁴ The Inquiry, through its listening project 'In Your Own Words', has also recently published a paper documenting their initial findings from a 3-question survey focused on how the scandal impacted people's relationships and family life.⁵

Our follow-up study builds on these works and provides additional information to help strengthen our understanding of the scandal on secondary victims.

We used six clinical measures to gain insight into the impacts the PO scandal has had on participants' **mental health, life experiences, attitudes and beliefs**. These are not being used here to suggest or confirm medical

¹ If you experience distress reading this paper, you are encouraged to consider reaching out to a support service. Resources you could access: if you have thoughts of suicide, please call 999 or the National Suicide Prevention Helpline at 0800 689 5652; You can also text the Shout Crisis Text Line "SHOUT" at 85258; You can obtain info on a range of mental health issues and helplines from the NHS (<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/>) or Mind (<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/helplines-listening-services/>).

² The term 'SPM' is used in an inclusive way to recognise the former subpostmasters and subpostmistresses but also acknowledges other PO employees who were affected by the scandal (such as counter clerk workers).

³ Grown B, Kukucka J, Moorhead R, & Helm RK (2024) The Post Office Scandal in the United Kingdom: Mental health and social experiences of wrongly convicted and wrongly accused individuals 29 *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 17-31
<https://doi.org/10.1111/lcrp.12247>

⁴ Hereafter termed the 'Inquiry'. See: https://www.postofficehorizoninquiry.org.uk/hearings/listing?hearing_type=81&witness=All

⁵ See: <https://www.postofficehorizoninquiry.org.uk/news/65-people-affected-horizon-scandal-say-it-has-affected-their-relationships-report-reveals>

diagnoses, but instead to develop knowledge of the variety and extent of possible harms caused by the scandal.

The measures used were:

- the PTSD checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5) with Life Events Checklist (LEC-5),
- the Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale – Short form (CES- D-SF),
- the Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7),
- the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), and
- the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)⁶.

Data on the participants' relationship to the primary victim/survivor⁷, demographic information, and employment status were collected.

The survey also asked whether participants were living with the primary victim/survivor at the time that primary victim was questioned/investigated by PO.

At the end of the survey, participants were provided with the opportunity to share any further thoughts about the impact of the scandal, if they wished to do so, and we report on those under the “qualitative responses” section of this brief report.

In total, 51 participants completed the entirety of the survey, although 108 participants started the survey and completed some portion of it. Such a group is hard to reach. We do not claim this is a representative sample of all

⁶ See: Weathers FW, Litz BT, Keane TM, Palmieri PA, Marx BP, Schnurr PP (2013) The PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5) <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/assessment/adult-sr/ptsd-checklist.asp>; Levine SZ. (2013) Evaluating the seven-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies depression scale short-form: a longitudinal U.S. community stud, 48(9) Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol 1519-26. doi: 10.1007/s00127-012-0650-2; Spitzer RL, Kroenke K, Williams JBW, Löwe B (2006) A Brief Measure for Assessing Generalized Anxiety Disorder: The GAD-7, 166(10) Arch Intern Med 1092-1097. doi:10.1001/archinte.166.10.1092; Cohen S, Kamarck T, & Mermelstein R (1983) Perceived Stress Scale. APA PsycTests. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t02889-000>; Zimet GD, Dahlem NW, Zimet SG, & Farley GK (1988). The multidimensional scale of perceived social support, 52(1) Journal of personality assessment 30-41.

⁷ Participants were also asked if the primary victim (1) was convicted of a criminal offence (2) was prosecuted but not convicted (3) was threatened or investigated for theft or other dishonesty offences (4) was bankrupted because of debts from the Post Office (5) was sued/threatened with court proceedings to repay alleged shortfalls (6) lost their post office/job suddenly because of shortfall problems (7) was asked to/agreed to pay shortfall debts without court being threatened. If participants selected option (1) then they were also asked whether their family received a custodial sentence or not. They were able to indicate if they were unsure about the outcome(s) experienced by their family member.

secondary victims of the scandal, but it provides important insight into their experiences.

An important note in this regard is that some potential participants indicated that they were not able to complete a study of this nature due to acute suffering related to the scandal.

Quantitative Results

Our results suggest that secondary victims of the PO Scandal experience mental illness symptoms at worryingly high levels compared to the general population, and, amongst these respondents, comparable to those experienced by primary victim/survivors of the scandal in our first survey.

We found that the majority of respondents met the clinical cut-off for post-traumatic stress symptoms (66.7% of the 54 respondents answering the relevant questions) and depressive symptoms (69.8% of the 53 respondents answering the relevant questions).

These estimates of post-traumatic stress and depressive symptoms are far higher than would be expected in the general population,⁸ and are similar to those found in primary victim/survivors of the scandal in our prior work (in which 67% of respondents met the clinical cut-off for post-traumatic stress symptoms and 60.4% met the clinical cut-off for depressive symptoms).

In addition, 54.7% of the 54 respondents who completed our anxiety-related questions met the cut-off point for requiring evaluation for high levels of anxiety (with 41.5% of participants meeting criteria indicating severe anxiety). Scores on the perceived stress scale were also very high compared to averages in the general population.⁹

Qualitative Results

Qualitative responses echoed much of what former SPMs shared in their evidence to the Inquiry's Human Impact Phase and the findings of the

⁸ Craig R, Fuller E, & Mindell J (Eds) (2015) Health Survey for England 2014: Health, social care and lifestyles. NatCen Social Research.

⁹ Respondents mean score on that scale was 23.01, compared to means of 11.09-17.46 (varying by age) in the general population; See: Cohen S and Janicki-Deverts D (2012) Who's Stressed? Distributions of Psychological Stress in the United States in Probability Samples from 1983, 2006, and 2009 Journal of Applied Social Psychology 1320-1334 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.00900.x>.

listening project survey, illustrating generational trauma¹⁰– specifically, secondary victims experiencing mental health harms, feelings of acute loneliness, struggling with alcohol abuse, and children of SPMs feeling a lack of closure due to their SPM parent passing away before the truth of the scandal became publicised and/or before receiving compensation. Participants also reported estrangement from their SPM family member, breakdowns in wider familial relationships, and intimate partner relationships ending. One response that captured this plight stated, “relationships become broken and are difficult to repair, if at all”.

We also found extensive evidence of additional harms (that reflect findings from data we have collected during interviews with former SPMs and their family members).¹¹ These include stigma, ostracization, and self-isolation, the all-consuming nature of the Inquiry, families experiencing mental health harms and suicidal ideations, loss of trust in official systems and technology, feeling the scandal and impacts are never-ending, hiding impacts from SPM family members, and experiencing self-gaslighting (convincing themselves that their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions are invalid).

Responses clearly demonstrate how dominant the scandal was/is in the lives of those it affected, and the impact that it had on other life events. For example, one person explained that since their mother passed away, “because of the ongoing problems with my partner and Post Office, I have never had time to grieve”.

Additional findings from this survey shed light on particular dynamics concerning **survivorship** and living with the impacts of the scandal. A few participants noted that whilst many SPMs struggle to access professional support services, family members were even more invisible in this regard and there was a lack of official recognition of their needs. One person shared, “everyone feels for my husband, but no one realises I was a partner in the business and I lost everything just like him”. Children of SPMs reported mirroring their parents’ maladaptive strategies for coping, often feeling unable to disclose difficulties and access support. Respondents spoke of living with a constant dread, fear, and anxiety that their SPM family member was still at risk of having a serious mental health crisis, a nervous breakdown, and/or taking their own life. One person wrote, “I am on constant alert in case that person has another breakdown”. Another explained, “my ‘person’ to rely on is my mum, and they [PO] almost took her in many ways...I live in fear it’ll happen again, I’ll lose her”. This highlights

¹⁰ In broad terms, generational trauma refers to the psychological and emotional effects of trauma that are passed down through generations. This includes, but is not limited to, descendants having some level or type of exposure to the traumatic event, for example, witnessing and experiencing the impacts/outcomes of the traumatic event on those who were directly affected.

¹¹ To be published in a forthcoming report.

ongoing mental health vulnerabilities generated from the scandal that families are forced to manage in their daily lives, largely on their own.

A related phenomena was responsabilisation of the victims, that manifested in various ways. Children of SPMs reported experiencing 'role reversals', one person said, "I often felt/feel responsible for my younger siblings because I took on a sort of parenting role in the absence of my parents".¹² Another respondent suggested a tangled web of mental health harms caused by the scandal taking a blameless parent away from them whilst they felt those responsible or able to help did not care:

"The impact of my Dad's PTSD from the post office continues, all these years later, to impact my life on a regular basis. His understandable need to focus on his trauma means he just doesn't have capacity to tend to my emotional needs. When I struggle, need support, he isn't able to focus on me. He is easily overwhelmed. I believe this is a normal human response, that any of us would have. However, the feeling of being unsupported is compounded by the feeling of unfairness, that this wasn't an unavoidable accident. A feeling that those who had power, who made decisions that so greatly impacted our lives, don't care about our emotional pain, and the 'practical disadvantages' that follow".

Children reported having their childhoods stolen by the PO, one person said, "I have grown up with the post office and the scandal for over 22 years now, I know no different, and it overshadows and affects every aspect of my life".

This lack of freedom, blocked opportunities, and having the trajectory of their lives forever altered, has caused immense mental health harms. One person explained, "I'm angry that we lost 20+ years of our lives and lost the people we were/could have been". Family members shared feelings of helplessness and "anguish" as they had no power or control over what was happening to their loved ones. Speaking of their SPM partner another stated they were, "unable to do anything but support her as best I could".

Shifting roles was also raised in the context of intimate partner relationships. Respondents spoke of taking on additional burdens as their SPM partners battled mental health problems and decision-paralysis/fatigue. One participant said:

"My mental health has been impacted in the following ways, my partner had a nervous breakdown, and to this day still has

¹² It is important to note that in discussions of responsabilisation, both children and (former) partners of SPMs were not engaging in victim-blaming of the primary victim/survivors of the scandal, but were instead describing the harmful consequences from being wrongly accused and pursued by PO.

ongoing mental health problems, relies on me for everything, I am not a partner now I am more a mother... I have to do all the household work, plus make all decisions relating to us. I have had to attend all the [lawyer] meetings as my partner cannot face these, and take all the decisions from this. I live many miles away from family, and therefore have no support network”.

Partners also spoke of the lives that had been “ruined” by the impacts of the scandal. One person reflected, “we both would have been retired by now exploring the world and enjoying our family” had they not been pursued by PO. Both children and partners of SPMs described finding it difficult to identify and share their feelings with others due to the trauma they have endured. It is clear from survey responses that the impacts of the scandal are, as one respondent put it, “life changing for the individual [SPM] and thus their family”.

The potential for official responses to play a role in addressing some of the harm caused by the scandal was also raised, one person explained “when the injustice came to light, it brought all our family together again”. Another said, “I just want to see justice for my dad. I feel me and my family can't get closure until that happens”, indicating how the ripple effect of harm may be closely linked to notions of a just response to the scandal.

Summary

This work provides evidence that the harms caused by the PO Scandal are not limited to primary victim/survivors. The impact on secondary victims can be severe, even perhaps comparable to the primary victim/survivors.

The comments from our respondents suggest impacts that are diverse, dynamic, interconnected, and life-limiting.

The ongoing levels of post-traumatic stress and depressive symptoms as well as anxiety and stress in secondary victims of the scandal is extremely concerning.

Respondents raised the urgent need for a dedicated and tailored, official support responses to secondary victims in their own right. And that professional help needs to be context-specific, relevant, and appropriate for the secondary victims of the scandal.