

UK police are spending as much as 40% of their time dealing with incidents triggered by some kind of mental health issue, against a backdrop of severe cuts in social and health services, the Guardian has learned.

Research by the Guardian shows that the overall number of incidents recorded in police logs as being related to mental health rose by a third between 2011 and 2014, a trend that looks set to continue.

Joanne McCartney, chair of the London assembly's police and crime committee, said local authorities and health services had less capacity and staff to deal with mental health issues as they came under pressure from cuts.

*"As a measure of last resort the police are going to have to be the ones to respond to incidents," said McCartney. "They will do their best and do now have training in how to deal with vulnerable people, but they are not best placed to do that. They are not mental health professionals."*

Friend cites an example: on Christmas Day last year, a distressed young woman had set her bed linen on fire and was having trouble breathing. She had made one phone call to a mental health unit. There was nothing more: no name, no address, no clue to her whereabouts.

Friend called for a grade one emergency response, the highest level. Officers in the police control room pinpointed the location of the mobile phone used by the woman, and police, fire and ambulance crews rushed over.

*"It was a very real incident that could have had terrible consequences, but that engagement with myself and the police worked brilliantly," said Friend. "It was a really busy shift on Christmas Day. There were a number of incidents coming through, some awful incidents."*

*"People can really struggle at Christmas. But because I was called by a colleague at the mental health unit about the call, and because I was sitting next to a police officer in a response car, because I was able to tell the police this is real, you need to go to this ... it worked out. In the end no one was harmed."*

Friend's laptop gives her 24-hour access to mental health data and patient records. "As we respond to an incident I will be on my laptop and my phone finding out whether the individual is known to mental health services – often I will know the person myself and I can advise the officers. If the person is very unwell and cannot be managed safely I can call for a Mental Health Act assessment to see if they need to be sectioned. It's very difficult for the police to do that alone."