The current research, funded by the British Academy and National Institute for Health Research, uses secondary analysis of the existing records to establish statistical patterns of s136 detention in relation to age, gender, location and other demographics, as well as in-depth interviews and observations with health professionals, police and people who have been detained. Professor Bendelow found that, “Brighton and Hove, Eastbourne, Hastings and Crawley all have significant demands on their mental health services, and, despite the provision of six s136 hospital suites across Sussex, over two-thirds of those detained were taken into police custody in 2012.” In particular, the statistics indicate a need for more appropriate crisis interventions by ‘out of hours’ services and Sussex Police were the first force to receive funding for a Street Triage pilot study to develop alternative approaches to detention in 2013 in Eastbourne.

In the new Sussex model, the trained police response officers work alongside an experienced mental health professional after 5pm from Wednesday to Friday and all weekend – the times when most emergency calls come in. The team uses an unmarked car to reach situations quickly, so the triage nurse can make a rapid initial assessment and provide appropriate help for the person in need.

“Although there will inevitably be some people who will be so distressed that detention under s136 may be the only way to save their lives, the whole process is far more likely to prevent this taking place when it is not necessary and can instead signpost the person to more appropriate help or intervention,” said Professor Bendelow. Street Triage officers and health professionals are able to share information to develop a clear understanding of what is available locally and how best to access it.

Early findings from the research suggest that for the police, using alternatives to s136, such as Street Triage has strengthened their relationship not only with Sussex Partnership Trust, but with all relevant agencies, including South East Coast Ambulance Service, the coastguards, the Samaritans, Grassroots Suicide Prevention charity and many other voluntary organisations. “This joined-up approach across all the agencies is the only effective way forward,” said Professor Bendelow. The next stage will be to link the findings from the Sussex pilot to other regional pilots to develop a national model of good practice based on this integrated approach.

Academics at the University of Brighton are contributing to a Department of Health and Home Office response to a crisis in emergency mental health care, by providing vital insights and novel approaches to address the high number of Mental Health Act police detentions across Sussex.

Police in England and Wales are empowered to detain individuals who are thought to be a danger to themselves or others under Section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983. Use of this authority is widespread but controversial since it requires the police to make judgements about mental health and involuntarily detaining individuals in police custody who may not have committed any crime.

Gillian Bendelow, Professor of Sociology of Health and Medicine at the University of Brighton, is leading research to build on and extend current knowledge of mental health emergencies across the NHS trusts, the Police and other agencies in Sussex. She conducted a pilot study using focus groups with police officers to discuss their use of section 136 in three differing regional areas across the UK. The study found that police were using s136 mainly as a form of suicide prevention.