



2021 Review

CIPSRT
Canadian Institute for Public Safety
Research and Treatment



ICRTSP
Institut canadien de recherche et
de traitement en sécurité publique

Background

The nature of work conducted by public safety personnel (PSP) increases the risk of experiencing potentially psychologically traumatic events (PTE), which can lead to emotional and behavioral disturbances that impede occupational functioning¹. Some groups identify a subset of PTE as critical incidents; however, there is substantial diversity regarding which PTE constitute a critical event for which groups of professionals². The diversity may help explain their disparate mental health outcomes associated with activities designed to mitigate the impact of PTE on PSP³. A pan-Canadian study with PSP indicated that 54.6% of correctional workers screened positive for one or more mental health disorders, a rate statistically significantly higher than the diagnostic rate in the general population. The same study indicated correctional workers were the most likely to screen positive for three or more different disorders³. A subsequent study evidenced most correctional officers (COs) working within prisons (i.e., 57%) also screened positive for one or more mental health disorders⁴.

All PSP face unique occupational challenges that can impact their mental health and challenge their ability to cope. Mental health symptoms among COs appear impacted by multiple factors, such as the physical condition of prisons⁵, safety concerns⁶, shift work⁷, bullying, and/or harassment⁸, as well as the compounding stress from seemingly innocuous tasks, like paperwork⁹. Occupational stressors also impact factors other than mental health, such as individual absenteeism or low job satisfaction, and organizational factors such as financial costs^{10,11}.

A significant gap in programming exists to mitigate the occupationally-related mental health challenges facing COs. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has partnered with the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) since 2015 to implement mental health training programs for correctional workers. The programs are intended to promote well-being by reducing the stigma of mental health and teaching skills for stress management. By 2019, almost 80% of CSC employees had participated in at least one training program¹²; nevertheless, CO's continue to report mental health symptoms at rates that warrant immediate attention. Mitigating the occupationally-related mental health challenges facing correctional workers may require a diverse set of ongoing programming and additional research, all tailored to the unique needs of Canadian COs.



Trounson et al.¹³ developed the Advanced Mental Strength and Conditioning (AMStrength) program as a psychoeducational training program for COs and then adapted the Australian-based program for a Canadian context¹². The pre-employment program is designed to teach CO recruits how to identify and manage their mental health using specific coping skills. The seven 2-hour modules of the AMStrength program use an interactive approach designed to encourage trainees to become active learners¹². Trainees are expected to practice identifying their mental health status and using appropriate skills during the training program to support the long-term goal of successfully applying the material during their careers.

The AMStrength program uses an eclectic approach that includes evidence-based techniques and perspectives from acceptance and commitment therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, health psychology, and positive psychology^{14,15}. The AMStrength is a training component of CSC's Employee Mental Health Training Program. Other component includes an initial version for all new CSC employees, a refresher training, and an information session for the family members/relatives.

Evaluating AMStrength Initial and Future Directions

Published clinical evaluations of the AMStrength training program with CO recruits are not available to date. The program materials do not include citations which makes identifying the foundational rationale for specific components difficult. More research is warranted to inform wide-scale delivery of AMStrength to CO recruits who are completing the Canadian Correctional Officer Training Program (CTP).

Future independent researchers must evaluate and optimize the AMStrength program for Canadian COs and correctional workers more generally. Potential evaluation methods include (a) an experimental design assessing effectiveness with pre- and post-AMStrength measures; or (b) a systematic content review and Delphi content examination. An experimental design can directly assess program effectiveness regarding intended outcomes, which is a critically important step, but would require significant resource investments. A systematic content review and Delphi offers an arguably faster and less costly interim alternative to examine the AMStrength components and inform probabilistic training impacts. We recommend researchers engage in both swift and in-depth evaluations.

1. American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Association.
2. Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment [CIPSRT] (2020). Glossary of Terms: A Shared Understanding Of The Common Terms Used To Describe Psychological Trauma (Version 2.1). Regina, SK: CIPSRT.
3. Carleton, R. N., Afifi, T. O., Turner, S., Taillieu, T., Duranceau, S., LeBouthillier, D. M., ... & Asmundson, G. J. G. (2018). Mental disorder symptoms among public safety personnel in Canada. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 63, 54-64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743717723825>
4. Ricciardelli, R., Taillieu, T., Carleton, N. R., Afifi, T., Mitchell, M. M., Barnim, N., et al. (2019). Correctional Work, wellbeing and mental health disorders. *Adv. Correct. J.* 8.
5. Bieri, D. M. (2012b). The impact of prison conditions on staff well-being. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 56, 81-95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X10388383>
6. Arnold, H. (2017). The psychological and emotional effects of prison on prison staff. In J. L. Ireland, C. A. Ireland, M. Fisher, & N. Gredecki (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of forensic psychology in secure settings* (pp. 283-299). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315673073-21>
7. Ricciardelli, R., Carleton, R. N., Gacek, J., & Groll, D. L. (2020). Understanding needs, breaking down barriers: Examining mental health challenges and wellbeing of correctional staff in Ontario, Canada. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1036. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01036>
8. Ricciardelli, R., Czarnuch, S., Carleton, R. N., Gacek, J., & Shewmake, J. (2020). Canadian public safety personnel and occupational stressors: How PSP interpret stressors on duty. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17, 4736. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17134736>
9. Carleton, R. N., Afifi, T. O., Taillieu, T., Turner, S., Mason, J. E., Ricciardelli, R., ... & Griffiths, C. T. (2020). Assessing the relative impact of diverse stressors among public safety personnel. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17, 1234. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17041234>
10. Lambert, E. G., Reynolds, K. M., Paoline III, E. A., & Watkins, R. C. (2004). The effects of occupational stressors on jail staff job satisfaction. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 27, 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0735648x.2004.9721627>
11. Norman, M., & Ricciardelli, R. (2021). Operational and organisational stressors in community correctional work: Insights from probation and parole officers in Ontario, Canada. *Probation Journal*, 0264550520984253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0264550520984253>
12. Mongrain, S. (2019, September). Creating an impactful mental preparedness training at the correctional service of Canada: A consideration for pedagogy. *Asian and Pacific Conference of Correctional Administrators, Newsletter*, 47, 12-16.
13. Trounson, J. S., Pfeifer, J. E., & Ogloff, J. R. P. (2016). Advanced mental strength and conditioning (AMStrength). ForenSciTech Pty. Ltd
14. Ricciardelli, R., & Adorjan, M. (2020). Correctional officer training: Opportunities and challenges of the AMstregnth Program in Canada. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice*, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24732850.2020.1829445>
15. Trounson, J. S., & Pfeifer, J. E. (2017). Correctional officers and workplace adversity: Identifying interpersonal, cognitive, and behavioral response tendencies. *Journal of Correctional Health Care*, 23, 437-448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078345817720923>

Review prepared by: Rachel Krakauer, MA
Edited and reviewed by: Dr. R. N. Carleton, Dr. R. Ricciardelli,
and Dr. N. Jones