

## **[GROLL]** Understanding the Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders in Provincial Correctional Officers – A National Study

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**Priority Research Area:** 1. Data collection, analysis and/or reporting on the incidence and prevalence of PTSD in PSP, which may also include information on relevant co-morbidities and health determinants;

2. Biological, clinical and social characteristics of PTSD, including differences that contribute to the risk for developing PTSD and measures/characteristics that may be associated with better treatment outcomes and resilience among PSP.

**Relevant PSP Population(s):** Correctional Services

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**What is the issue?** Data examining the impact of PTSD on mental health outcomes among PSP groups and their occupational environments remains limited in Canada, and there is currently limited, if any, information on the prevalence of PTSDs in provincial and territorial correctional services. Correctional staff work in institutions, and in the community, with prisoners and those released into the community on parole/probation. They work in environments where they are at risk of direct or indirect (or both) exposure to potentially psychologically traumatic events and we lack data explicating how these events as well as organizational and operational stressors and occupational experiences impact correctional worker mental health and well-being.

**What was the aim of the study?** Findings from the current study will lead to research and applied innovations that can serve to help improve the mental wellness and resilience of Canada's provincial and territorial correctional workers. By obtaining critical baseline information on the mental health of COs in Canada, our aim in the research is to:

1. Determine the prevalence of mental disorders and PTSDs among provincial and territorial correctional workers.
2. Identify characteristics (clinical, social, and biological) that are associated with PTSDs among correctional workers.
3. Identify characteristics (clinical, social, and biological) that are associated with resiliency or positive mental health outcomes among correctional workers in the provincial or territorial systems.

**How was the study conducted?** Data were collected through an online survey, available in French and English, of correctional workers in the provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, as well as one territory. The survey administered in each province/territory is supported by the respective department and union. The surveys are approximately 300 questions long and contained validated self-report mental health symptom assessment tools. After COVID-19, the survey will be administered in all remaining provinces and territories that are agreeable to participation.

**What did the study find?** Data analysis continues currently (with data collection being interrupted by Covid-19). Analysis of data from provincial correctional services in Ontario show that positive screens for all mental health disorders increased with age. Correctional workers in the 40-49 year old group had the highest number of positive screens. The more years of occupational tenure also equated to an increased likelihood that the correctional service provider would screen positive for a disorder. Employees working in institutional wellness (e.g., nurses, social workers) were less likely to screen positive for mental health disorders than correctional officers and

probation officers. Prevalence rates for different mental health disorders in the total sample included: 30.7 % PTSD, 37% MDD, 30.5% GAD, 14.1% PD, 6.7% AUD. Correctional officers were most likely to screen positive for mental disorders. We also found staff experience organizational and occupational stressors that negatively impact their well-being.

**What are the implications of this study?** As the first, and currently only, study of provincial and territorial correctional workers, our findings will form the baseline for all future comparative studies in these populations. The information is critical for policy development, not just to improve the mental health and wellbeing of correctional service providers, but to put into place structures and practices to mitigate the impact of carceral work on employee mental health and well-being. The current study provides the benchmark against which any changes in policy or procedures to improve the health and well-being of staff can be measured, the impact of which cannot be understated.

**What are the key messages?** Correctional service providers screen positive for mental disorders at rates much higher than the general population. Moreover, they feel unheard and voiceless despite their concerns. Correctional service providers experience occupational stress, and at times feel organizational pressures (e.g., workload) impair their ability to do all they can for those under their supervision. More needs to be done to improve staff wellness.

**Provide a list of potential target audiences for this research:** Our results will be of interest to policy makers, clinicians, and community and institutional correctional service audiences as well as unions, government departments or ministries tied to public safety, and stakeholders. Knowledge mobilization will continue to target these audiences.