

[RICCIARDELLI] *Understanding the impact of prison work on the mental health of Correctional Officers employed by Correctional Services Canada: Beginning a longitudinal study*

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Priority Research Area: 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

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

Mental health awareness, stigma reduction, anti-discrimination, and/or literacy programs that have the potential to improve mental wellness among PSP

Relevant PSP Population(s): Correctional Services

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What is the issue? Correctional work is challenging, stressful, and potentially traumatic. Researchers have sought to identify factors that increase the potentiality for correctional officers (COs) to develop psychological disorders but none have explored if COs feel prepared for their job challenges at occupational entry. Limits in evidence-based knowledge undermine the depth of information available to inform correctional practices in ways that help ensure a healthy and safe correctional workforce.

What was the aim of the study? The current study served as a pilot for a larger longitudinal study where we assess CO well-being from recruitment to years post deployment. We sought to identify correctional officer recruits (CORs) mental health status, coping skills, views, and experiences at occupational entry and to use this information to inform pre-employment preparation and skill provision. We ask what influences a COR to enter the field, if they have prior military or public safety personnel (PSP) experience, their meaning-making around physical space, gender, and understanding of safety. We also ask about experiences that have shaped them over their life and their mental health (e.g., trauma, mental health diagnosis).

How was the study conducted? As planned, we conducted clinical interviews by administering a structured diagnostic psychological assessment (the Mini-International Neuropsychiatric Interview [M.I.N.I.]) to recruits to provide a baseline of their historical and present mental health at employment entry. We also completed in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews to provide context to the data collected in the M.I.N.I. and to identify factors peripheral to the M.I.N.I. that shape correctional work and therein COR wellbeing. We studied the response-based diagnostic criteria in the structured clinical interview and the narrative open ended responses from the qualitative interviews to create an informed understanding of the COR-CO experience.

What did the study find? Many study participants had prior armed forces or public safety background, including prior employment in correctional services. From the M.I.N.I. assessments we learned that although many CORs experienced mental disorders over their lifetime, CORs were actively in good mental health. For example, 30% of CORs had experienced a major depressive episode in the past but none were currently experiencing a major depressive episode. Overall, recruits report very low rates of positive screens for recent (past 7 days to past month) depression, anxiety, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, alcohol use disorders, or panic disorders and participants reported low rates of suicidal thoughts, suicide plans, and attempted death by suicide in the past 12 months. The qualitative interviews inform us of the motivations of CORs for entering the field (e.g., some intrinsic and some extrinsic), and how life experiences informed their perspectives on prisons, prisoners, and their occupational work. Moreover, we were able to create the necessary processes, tools, and organizational

structures collaboratively with our partner organization and unions that ensure the foundational work for a longitudinal study is cemented.

What are the implications of this study? The current mental health of CORs is generally quite good yet we know that correctional staff do experience compromised mental health at rates significantly higher than those among the general Canadian population. The findings generated from the current and ongoing study help to inform recruitment, support early identification of officers in need of help, reduce individual vulnerability, and provide insight into how institutional cultures vary. These findings are important to contextualize officer well-being and occupational orientations to ultimately inform training processes and improve CO mental health and other correctional staff over time.

What are the key messages? Correctional officer recruits, toward the beginning of their training, are generally quite mentally healthy. Many are intrinsically motivated toward a career in correctional services but extrinsic motivations remain. More needs to be done to ensure CORs stay healthy over the course of their career.

Provide a list of potential target audiences for this research: Correctional Services Canada, and correctional services in each province and territory in Canada as well as internationally. Correctional Services related Unions (UCCO-SACC-CSN, USJE), stakeholders, policy makers, and practitioners.