



Research Summary: Mental Disorder Symptoms among Public Safety Personnel in Canada

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**The full research paper can be freely accessed from the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry at:
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Public safety personnel and stressful experiences

Individuals employed in public safety jobs—such as correctional workers, dispatchers, firefighters, paramedics, or police officers, among others—are required to respond to high-stress situations as a regular part of their work. Some of the high-stress situations may occur repeatedly and can be traumatic, potentially leaving long-lasting signs of stress. These types of stressors can have a cumulative effect – that is, stressors slowly increase, and the buildup wears down people’s abilities to cope. Symptoms commonly experienced as a result of trauma can include depression, general anxiety, anxiety about specific things (such as being in crowds), or relying on alcohol to cope. Some people experience a set of symptoms referred to as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which can involve re-experiencing the trauma through nightmares or flashbacks, feeling like they are unable to cope with the reminders of the trauma (e.g., revisiting the trauma location), and experiencing negative changes in the way they feel and think about themselves or the world.

From research with the general public, we know that some people do experience mental health concerns after extreme stress. Public safety personnel are more likely to experience frequent potentially traumatizing situations than the general public. Research from around the world indicates that people in public safety jobs may be more likely to develop mental health concerns, likely because of how often they experience extreme stressors, such as exposure to death, massive injuries, and witnessing the suffering of others whom they cannot help. Until recently, however, mental health concerns in Canadian public safety personnel have remained relatively unstudied.

Developing a research survey for Canadian public safety personnel

A large team of researchers affiliated with the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment (CIPSRT) and spanning several universities came together to get a clearer picture of mental health in Canadian public safety personnel. A survey was designed with questions about on-the-job trauma experiences, as well as mental health symptoms such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, and potentially harmful alcohol use.

The survey was available in English and French, and was shared through public safety organizations, email, and social media. A total of 5,813 Canadians working in public safety jobs completed the questions used for the current report. People were asked to answer questions about their mental health symptoms within the past month, allowing for a current snapshot of mental health in Canadian public safety careers.

Survey Research Results

- Many participants screened positively for symptoms consistent with one or more mental health concerns.
- Participants in different professions reported different rates of mental health concerns. For example, municipal/provincial police officers and firefighters were less likely to screen positive for mental health disorders than people in the other careers. Why these differences exist is unclear, but they may be due to differences in: working with others compared to working alone; type and geographic location where the work is done; how well supported they feel; and/or the riskiness of the populations being served.
- All of the public safety personnel seem more likely to screen positive for mental health concerns than we might expect for the general public.
- People who reported being married or common-law had lower levels of mental health concerns. This speaks to the importance of close social support in high-stress careers.
- Participants appeared more likely to screen positive for mental health concerns the longer they worked in their public safety jobs. Increasing symptoms for older participants might be due to having more time to experience stress and trauma, but other factors (e.g., differences between generations) should be considered in future research.

Why this research matters and what comes next

This research provides an important snapshot of how Canadian public safety personnel are currently coping with the high-stress nature of their jobs. Much research to date has focused on the Canadian Forces and this new survey provides similar information with a large number of public safety personnel in Canada. The current survey results provide an important roadmap for researchers and public safety organizations. There are always limits to the kind of information that can be gathered from online surveys, one next step might be face-to-face interviews to get a better and more interactive account of people's experiences. In the meantime, the researchers hope that the current information will eventually help to reduce stigma and pave the way for efficient, reliable, and targeted mental health services for people who are experiencing long-term symptoms of stress from risky or traumatic work experiences.

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