



A Brief Review of Anxiety-Related Psychopathology and Chronic Pain Comorbidity among Public Safety Personnel

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Chronic pain is pain that does not go away, even after the normal healing process has ended. Chronic pain is not only painful, it is also very costly. Approximately 25% of Canadians suffer from chronic pain, a trend that costs the government an estimated 6 billion dollars each year. Canadians who have jobs that increase their risk of injury are also at increased risk of developing chronic pain. Canadian public safety personnel (PSP), such as call centre operators/dispatchers, correctional officers and workers, firefighters, paramedics, and police, regularly risk their physical and mental wellbeing in the service of their communities. Challenges to their physical and mental health include threatened or actual physical assaults, fires, and explosions. Over 44% of Canadian PSP are suffering from one or more mental health disorders such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and alcohol use disorder.

We know that chronic pain is very costly, personally and economically, and that PSP appear to be at a higher risk for chronic pain, but we know very little about the link between chronic pain and mental health disorders in Canadian PSP. This study was designed to help find out how many Canadian PSP are currently suffering from chronic pain and mental health disorders.

We sent out a secure online survey to Canadian PSP and 5093 English or French speaking Canadians responded. These PSP came from a wide range of professions, including call centre operators/dispatchers, correctional officers and workers, firefighters, municipal/provincial police, paramedics, and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). All participants were asked questions that evaluated their mental and physical wellbeing, including whether they were currently experiencing chronic pain.

According to the survey results, not only do Canadian PSP experience more chronic pain than the average Canadian (i.e., 35-45.4%), but experiencing chronic pain appears to be linked to experiencing a mental health disorder, such as PTSD, major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, and alcohol use disorder. There also seems to be a link between traumatic stress symptoms and chronic pain; importantly, when both traumatic stress and chronic pain are present, the conditions seem to maintain each other.

Each day Canadian PSP put the safety of the Canadian population before their own physical and mental wellbeing. The potential consequences of their willingness to serve and protect have been emphasized in our results. Many Canadian PSP report suffering from both physical and mental pain, and we need to ensure they have effective resources to protect their health. We also need more resources to continue learning about what we can do to prevent, minimize, and treat these costly and potentially disabling conditions.