



LAY SUMMARY

Public Safety Personnel in Their Own Words: Asking for Support with Mental Health

Health includes the interaction of physical health, mental health, and social well-being. Stress might be a part of mental health, but stress can also deeply impact physical health and social well-being. Public safety personnel (PSP) are professionals working in public safety sectors as communications officials, community or institutional correctional workers, firefighters, paramedics, police, or as one of the many administrative professionals that support PSP. Current research suggests that the health consequences of PSP work can be very challenging. The potentially traumatic events faced by PSP are unlike those most civilians will ever encounter; however, for PSP, exposure to potentially traumatic events is a major part of their work responsibilities.

We know relatively little about mental health issues and the PSP, despite the potential impact a PSP career can have on employees and their family members. Those difficulties can be made worse by structural and systematic challenges and barriers that could make reporting mental health problems particularly difficult. We wanted to know how PSP experience such strains and difficulties as described in their own words.

The current study used data from an online survey that assessed mental health symptoms and invited open-ended feedback from PSP participants recruited through their respective employers or organizations, as well as through public service announcements. Over 9,000 participants completed the survey and 828 of those participants provided comments.

Findings

In analysing the PSP comments, the following core themes were identified:

PSP reported experiencing a sense of alienation between who they were personally and professionally prior to working in public safety and who they had become since working in public safety.

PSP reported feeling a sense of powerlessness regarding their future, vulnerability, and insufficient safety.

PSP reported feeling that their personal needs and their well-being, as well as that of their families, are ignored by employers and governing bodies.

Indeed, participant comments suggested they feel forsaken by their employers and government. The perception of government neglect appears particularly long-standing and pervasive, which is consistent with the relatively minimal Canadian research in support of PSP mental health.

The results also indicated that PSP desire a strong national and federal response that emphasizes:

- 1) recognition of PSP contributions;

- 2) recognition of the mental health challenges PSP experience; and,
- 3) a measurable effort towards improving support for members of our society who provide critical support for the safety of all citizens.

Unfortunately, despite their desire for such a response, the PSP participants also reported little or no hope that a meaningful response will occur. The absence of hope is particularly concerning because hopelessness is an identified risk factor for suicide; however, that same challenge also means that if meaningful hope can be provided, there may be an opportunity to reduce such risk.

Next Steps

The current results support continued investigation of the prevalence of mental health issues across different PSP sectors. The current results provide a forum for PSP to emphasize the importance and urgency of implementing a national action plan to provide evidence-based support through research and treatment for the mental health of our PSP and those who support them. This national action plan may provide opportunities to better support PSP through innovative ways to provide evidence-based treatment options and tailored pathways to accessing care. Going forward, there needs to be ways to ensure PSP consistently perceive their voices as heard, acknowledged, and valued.

Contact Us

For more information about this research, please contact CIPSRT@cipsrt-icrtsp.ca.

Ricciardelli, R., Carleton, R. N., Groll, D., & Cramm, H. (2018). Qualitatively unpacking Canadian public safety personnel experiences of trauma and their well-being. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 60(4), 566-577. Open access available:

<https://www.utpjournals.press/doi/full/10.3138/cjccj.2017-0053.r2>

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