



LAY SUMMARY

How Much Trauma is Too Much? Public Safety Personnel and Exposure to Traumatic Events

Public safety personnel (PSP) include professionals working in public safety sectors as communications officials, correctional workers, firefighters, paramedics, and police. PSP in Canada are facing growing difficulties dealing with mental health issues. There is more evidence that exposure to traumatic events may be linked to mental health disorders; however, little research has been done to find out which types of traumatic events are potentially more damaging than others, and how often the different public safety sectors are exposed to different traumatic events.

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. PSP members were asked to identify: the sector in which they worked (e.g. communications, corrections, fire, paramedicine, policing); which traumatic events they had experienced; and which event was the worst or most distressing. The participants were also asked to complete several mental health assessment questions.

Findings

The current results provided evidence that:

Most PSP report being exposed multiple times to sudden violent deaths, sudden accidental deaths, serious transportation accidents, and physical assaults. Exposure to potentially traumatic events appeared to be a part of the regular workload for PSP.

Sudden violent deaths, unexpected accidental deaths, and serious transportation accidents appeared to be the events most often considered traumatic for all PSP sectors.

The types of potentially traumatic events PSP encountered in their work differs from one public safety sector to another. For example, firefighters reported fewer incidences of causing physical injury to someone, whereas police reported facing fewer explosions.

Different types of potentially traumatic events were associated with different types of mental disorders. For example, screening positive for depression was connected to all types of potentially traumatic events, except for fire or explosions.

Sudden violent deaths and severe human suffering were reported as especially problematic for PSP and could be considered critical incidents, which may justify specific support services and programs for PSP who have been involved in such events.

The longer a PSP member serves, the greater his or her exposure to potentially traumatic events. The results indicated that PSP sector category, types of exposure to potentially traumatic events, uncertainty, perceptions about the events, and mental disorders all interact, creating a complex pattern that may require lots of tailoring to successfully manage. The results highlight the need for critical incident interventions and other mental health supports designed to lessen the effects of such exposure.

Contact Us

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

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