

MOVING FORWARD:

A REPORT ON THE INVISIBLE TOLL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA ON FEDERAL PUBLIC SAFETY WORKERS



PREPARED BY THE
UNION OF SOLICITOR
GENERAL EMPLOYEES
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USGE



SESG

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USGE represents more than 16,000 members who work to keep Canadians safe every day. USGE members have critical roles in the federal penitentiary system and RCMP detachments across Canada. Across 17 federal departments, they work to protect the safety and privacy of Canadians and to help provide access to information, justice and human rights.

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of an in-depth study into the experiences of working with traumatic material and within traumatic environments of federal public servants who work within the rubric of 17 public safety departments, agencies and commissions, as overseen by Canada's federal Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. Commissioned by the Union of Solicitor General Employees (USGE), the study demonstrates the high degree to which these workers are exposed to traumatic stories and incidents. Results show that a large proportion of these employees are suffering from an alarming rate of operational stress injuries, up to and including post-traumatic stress disorder.

The study found that public servants who are not directly experiencing or witnessing trauma are being indirectly exposed to and deeply affected by secondary trauma. "Secondary trauma" is a term used to describe indirect exposure that is secondhand in nature.

Three broad research questions are explored in this report: 1) how often are employees exposed to trauma, either directly or indirectly; 2) what is the impact of this exposure; and 3) how are employers mitigating this impact. By and large, the federal public employees at the centre of this study¹ admitted to high rates of exposure to trauma from speaking directly to individuals about criminal histories, listening to and transcribing victim statements, and reading disturbing files. Many reported experiencing a wide range of symptoms as a result of this exposure.

Qualitative and quantitative data was gathered from a 36 question national online survey and in-depth interviews with members of USGE. The respondents, predominantly female, included, RCMP public service employees who transcribe hundreds of hours of victim statements describing horrific child sexual abuse; institutional and community parole officers who document detailed histories of violent offenders; and correctional program officers who work in the assessment and treatment of sex offenders, among many others in Canada's federal public safety and justice systems.

Through these methods we discovered the following about this unique sector of federal public service:

A large majority of respondents who completed USGE's national survey disclosed experiencing at least some personal impact after viewing traumatic material as part of their job. Negative impacts such as insomnia and depression were widely reported occurring as a result of secondary exposure to trauma:

79.7% of survey respondents said that they experienced at least some personal impact from being exposed to traumatic materials such as written files, images, audio files and videos, as part of their job.

69.8% of respondents who work for the RCMP said that they experienced at least some personal impact while 82.9% of Correctional Service of Canada employees (CSC) - workers in Canada's federal prison system - who responded to the survey said that they experienced some personal impact.

¹ Approximately 6,690 of the federal public servants examined in this study work in Canada's federal prison system while approximately 5,000 work for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Many of the remaining approximately 4,000 members perform clerical or administrative duties for departments.

80.2% of all survey respondents indicated that they experienced at least one of the following symptoms as a result of working with traumatic material: insomnia, nightmares, depression, increased consumption of alcohol and drugs, unhealthy eating habits and relationship problems. Insomnia was widely reported with 69.8% of survey respondents saying that they experienced insomnia as a result of working with traumatic material and situations.

75.5% of RCMP workers said that they experienced at least one of insomnia, nightmares, depression, increased consumption of alcohol and drugs, unhealthy eating habits. 66.2% said that they dealt with insomnia.

85.7% of CSC workers said that they experienced at least one of insomnia, nightmares, depression, increased consumption of alcohol and drugs, unhealthy eating habits. 72% said that they dealt with insomnia.

Comments gathered from the national survey along with interview responses showed that many of these workers deal with other symptoms including hypervigilance, mistrust, desensitization, physical illness, and general fear and anxiety. In many cases these stories clearly show how this work can alter employees' basic assumptions about themselves, people, society, and safety.

RCMP detachment services assistant - "I've had some really, really horrible nightmares about some of the stuff that I've seen in pictures and I mean and this is a small town so these are pictures of things that have happened to people that I know."

CSC Institutional parole officer – "How can I sit at work and have to read and interact with a pedophile whose victim pool is that of boys ages 6-11 when my boys are 6, 8 and 11 years of age? You can't hit closer to home than that."

CSC Institutional parole officer - "I have woken up screaming in the night because I thought I was going through the same experience again... literally screamed out in the night, my wife lying right beside me.... literally scared her half to death. The last one was so vivid it was just unbelievable, I've never done that like just screamed out."

A high percentage of employees spend the majority of their days working with written files:

53.3% of survey respondents said that they spent more than 4 hours per day working with written files. 55.6% of RCMP employees and 50.8% from the CSC reported spending more than 4 hours per day working with written files.

RCMP Detachment Services Assistant – "My co-worker and I, I guess that's what we'd be doing all day, we'd be transcribing these statements from these boys, right, about what was done to them and you go home in the evening and you (blows out air), it was ah, it was just over and over and over again..."

Parole Board of Canada Case Review Officer - "you know what, the entire [day], almost ...is spent reading that, um, from the time I come in I start a file, it takes a while to get through it all, and then as soon as I'm done I move on to the next one so it's really that's the bulk of my work."

CSC Security Intelligence Officer - "Five days a week, all day long. Sometimes it's nice and slow and things go easy, but it's just constant, just constant."

Much of this written material includes traumatic content:

Of the 92.5% of respondents across all departments who said that they work with written material or statements during a typical workday, the vast majority (84.7%) of respondents said that they are exposed to traumatic content within this material. More than half of survey respondents said that this exposure occurred at least several times a week while over a quarter (26.1%) said that they are exposed several times a day.

45.3% of respondents who work for the RCMP said that they were exposed to traumatic content within written materials several times a week or more while 20% said that they were exposed to traumatic content several times a day.

From the CSC, 29.5% of survey respondents said that they are exposed to traumatic content in written material 'several times a day' while 26.9% said that it was 'several times a week'. Over 90% respondents who work for the CSC say that they listen to stories of trauma such as abuse, violence, sexual abuse, fatal accidents or suicide at least once a month. Close to one-third (29.6%) of respondents say that they here these types of stories several times a day while 28.9% said that it was 'several times a week'.

RCMP Violent Crimes unit worker – "Basically on a daily basis I read homicides and sex assaults all day long."

CSC Parole Officer - "We have to read police reports, we have to read judge's comments, we have to read victim impact statements, so in those documents I mean depending on the index offence, I mean the bottom line is we work with very violent offenders. I work with sex offenders."

A high percentage of CSC workers regularly reported being exposed directly to traumatic or traumatizing situations:

80.5% of CSC workers said that they experience at least some personal impact from exposure to, or the possibility of exposure to traumatic or stressful situations within their jobs. For RCMP employees who are exposed to, or could be exposed to, traumatic or stressful situations within their jobs, 74.4% said that there is at least some personal impact.

RCMP Program Administration, Victim Services Coordinator - "Dealing directly with victims of crime and trauma and some that are abusive or have mental health issues."

RCMP Detachment Services Assistant – “Currently working in a Detachment with NO functioning cells. Prisoners are held and processed in common office area.”

RCMP Detachment Services Assistant – “Unstable people attending the counter to speak to police officer, I work alone the majority of time so have no one else in the office to back me up or assist in an immediate fashion, phone calls from distraught people reporting incidents.”

CSC warehouse worker - “Just last week got to see an inmate stabbed 6 times in two seconds while I was 3 feet away...This is the sort of stuff that you know is going to happen and is difficult to prepare for, both physically and emotionally.”

A high percentage of the public safety workers examined in this study said that they had received little to no training to prepare them for dealing with exposure to secondary trauma. While employers, specifically the Correctional Service of Canada and the RCMP, have implemented some mental wellness training for its workers, it has been designed mostly to help public safety workers who are already suffering to recognize their symptoms.

Overall survey results show that 78% of respondents said that their current employer does not provide specific training for reading and viewing traumatic material while 76.5% said that they had not received training for listening to traumatic stories.

For RCMP and CSC workers respectively, 79.2% and 79.3% said that they had received no training for reading and viewing traumatic material.

RCMP Detachment Services Assistant – “We got very little training when I started. I think I may have gone to one course but no, very very little. I remember when I got this job, I had no idea what I would be doing. I remember when they came, I had to do this test and they were asking all these questions and I basically didn't know what I would be confronted with or dealing with on a daily basis and I just learned as I went along basically.”

CSC Parole Officer - “Traumatic situations trained for...not traumatic material, no training for that, no assistance for that...[the] only time it is mentioned is in the job description... vicarious trauma risk. [The] culture at work only supports taking time off work when staff are physically assaulted due to traumatic situations and [they] shame staff who become depressed/over-stressed due to traumatic material/or threats to their safety.”

Most RCMP employees who participated in the study, did not know that they would be exposed to traumatic situations or material, nor did they receive appropriate training.

Only 10.6% of respondents who work for the RCMP said that when they began their jobs, they knew that they would be exposed to traumatic situations or material and received appropriate training from their employer. The majority of respondents (60.3%) said that they knew that they might be exposed to traumatic situations or material, but received little training, while 27.8% said that they no idea that they would be exposed to traumatic situations or material and received no training.

RCMP Detachment Services Assistant - “The thing is, ah, you have the talk when they come in because, for a DSA you need grade twelve and some type of office admin course. That's all they need, right? And most of it, yes everybody like that can type and do this and that, but everything else you learn on the job.”

Based on these findings, the report urges federal government action to recognize the negative impacts of second-hand trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder and other operational stress injuries sustained by federal Public Safety employees. The recommendations include:

- Amend the Government Employees Compensation Act to recognize operational stress injury for public servants regularly exposed to both direct and second-hand trauma – setting a precedent for provincial Workplace Compensation Boards to recognize and provide compensation for secondhand trauma impacts.
- Expand the federal Employee Assistance Program to give public safety employees experiencing second-hand trauma access to specialized trauma counsellors.
- Create custom-designed resiliency and emotional preparedness training for new and existing public safety officers likely to have regular exposure to traumatic material.
- Design and implement de-stigmatization programs and training for new and existing managers in departments where workers are likely to have regular exposure to traumatic material.

Introduction

“How do you read some of the most traumatic, horrific and terrifying material (that you would see in a movie) and then come home to your family and NOT bring this home with you?” – Institutional Parole Officer

This quote is a poignant example of why Canada’s leading public safety union, the Union of Solicitor General Employees, commissioned a national study on the phenomenon of PTSD, and vicarious trauma, among federal public service employees. These employees, like the one above, spend their professional lives working in Canada’s federal penitentiaries, in dozens of community parole offices, and in every RCMP detachment, investigative unit and depot throughout the country.

While the challenges of this work hasn’t grabbed the same headlines as that done by Correctional officers who work exclusively as guards in federal prisons, the impact of working directly or indirectly with federal offenders and members of the public who perpetuate or experience violence is profound. More importantly, it is not well understood by the employer, the public, and elected officials themselves. It is why USGE dedicated nearly a year to develop and conduct an extensive survey, as well as individual interviews, to properly ascertain the extent of the impact of repeated ‘exposure to traumatic material and stories’, as well as individuals who have been deeply affected by violence, as perpetrators and/or victims.

Exposure to Violence among General Population

With the proliferation of social media, users are routinely viewing disturbing scenes of gruesome violence and death, in many cases against their wishes through surprise images popping up in newsfeeds. Recent studies have shown that exposure to this type of imagery can cause symptoms similar to post traumatic stress, such as an altered sense of self and hyper-vigilance.

The twenty-four-hour new cycle and the explosion of the internet means that exposure to images and stories of trauma is no longer limited to nightly newscasts. In addition, the pervasiveness of smartphones has ushered in an era where most traumatic events are being captured on camera. Clearly, even a single exposure to traumatic content, videos or stories can have an impact on an unsuspecting viewer.

For those who work with traumatic images and stories on a daily basis year after year, the impact can be debilitating. Indeed, the journalists and human rights workers whose job it is to painstakingly review and verify the eye witness accounts of horrific scenes of violence that we see on our social media feeds have been shown to suffer from many of the symptoms related to post traumatic stress.²

The purpose of USGE’S study is to demonstrate the degree to which public servants who work within the rubric of 17 public safety departments, agencies and commissions, as overseen by Canada’s federal Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, are exposed to a high frequency of traumatic stories and incidents. Through their work, it is clearly apparent that a high proportion of these employees are suffering from an alarming rate of operational stress injuries, up to and including post-traumatic stress disorder.

² Dubberley, S., Griffin, E., Haluk, M. B., “Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue: A Study of Eyewitness Media and Vicarious Trauma on the Digital Frontline, Eyewitness Media Hub, 2015.

A growing awareness of operational stress injuries

Similar to the recent realization that exposure to disturbing images through social media can cause symptoms related to post-traumatic stress disorder, understanding, identifying and mitigating mental health injuries among public safety workers due to exposure to trauma on the job is also a relatively new issue in Canada.

In four short years the public's attention to the issue of PTSD has grown quickly with mentions in major Canadian daily newspapers increasing three-fold from 2015 to 2016. Between 1993 and 2007 the acronym 'PTSD' appeared in headlines 30 times compared to 532 times in the 9 years between 2008 and 2016. The increased attention can be attributed, in part, due to work done by the Canadian military to raise awareness of the negative mental health impacts experienced by military personnel who served in Afghanistan.

Focus began shifting to Canadian police forces, paramedics and firefighters with the publication of a number of studies that showed how the constant exposure to trauma experienced by front line public safety workers was taking its toll. Increased media attention on rates of PTSD among veterans of the Canadian military, workers in Canada's tri-services (fire, police, ambulance) over the past decade has broadened the understanding of what is considered trauma work beyond the traditional limit of military and first responders.

Attention is now being given to workers who experience trauma in a wide variety of professions including, counselling, psychiatry, nursing, teaching, journalism, among others. While many employees never leave their desks and rarely interact with the public, a growing number of studies show that people in these professions are suffering from similar symptoms to those who have been involved in combat, or are tasked with picking up body-parts from crime scenes, accidents and fires.

Federal Employees within Canada's Public Safety system

While decisions makers are beginning to cast a wider net with policies that could protect and help workers who work in the field of public safety in this country, the stories of Canadian public servants who are secondarily exposed to trauma has not been told.

This report will contribute to this discussion by focusing on the 16,000 members of The Union of Solicitor General Employees (USGE). USGE represents a variety of public servants who work for 17 different departments and agencies within the public safety and justice ministries. These employees perform various duties on behalf of the federal governmental entities that are responsible for justice, corrections, national security and safety for people living in Canada.

This includes work as public servants within the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Correctional Service of Canada, Department of Justice and the Parole Board of Canada. Employees represented by USGE perform a vast number of different jobs in the public service, many of which involve difficult and stressful subject matters.

Approximately 6,690 of these employees work in Canada's federal prison system while approximately 5,000 work for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in jobs as wide ranging as parole officers, teachers, correctional program officers, librarians, case management assistants, mechanics, food service workers,

as well as RCMP detachment assistants, investigators in crime units, federal court transcribers, among many other jobs.

Many of the remaining approximately 4,000 members perform clerical or administrative duties for departments.

Secondary or Vicarious Trauma among Federal Public Employees

This report explores three broad questions:

- 1) how often are employees exposed to trauma;
- 2) what is the impact of this exposure; and
- 3) how are employers mitigating this impact.

The federal public employees at the centre of this study admitted to experiencing a wide range of symptoms related to post traumatic stress disorder, vicarious traumatization, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue and burnout. There is significant overlap in the symptomatology of these constructs within both the academic and mental health communities. Therefore, it is challenging to label the wide range of experiences described by the workers covered in this report, many of whom spend the bulk of their work days reading or listening to accounts of trauma. Others, for example, hear these accounts directly from offenders or members of the public, while some no doubt are directly exposed to traumatic incidents through offender violence directed at parole officers or other correctional employees, or through the RCMP and/or other agencies who deliver services to the public.

USGE's report underscores the fact that public servants who are not directly experiencing or witnessing trauma are being indirectly exposed to and deeply affected by secondary trauma. "Secondary trauma" is a term used to describe indirect exposure that is secondhand in nature. Secondary trauma is defined as the emotional, cognitive, and physical consequences of providing professional services to victims or perpetrators of trauma.³

Interviewees and survey respondents reported experiencing some or all of the seven symptoms of secondary trauma as defined by Figley (Figley 1995) including: 1) recollection, dreams and sudden re-experiencing of the event; 2) avoidance of thoughts, feelings or activities; 3) detachment or estrangement from others and activities; 4) emotional difficulties or outbursts; 5) concentration problems; 6) physiological reaction (difficulty sleeping); and 7) hypervigilance (Figley, 1995).

The American Psychological Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) describes this type of trauma as "repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s)" (APA, 2013, p. 271).⁴ While the DSM-5 is primarily focused on people who are in close proximity

³ Pettus-Davis, C., Severson, M., "Parole Officers' Experiences of the Symptoms of Secondary Trauma in the Supervision of Sex Offenders," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 57(1) 5– 24, 2013.

⁴ May and Wisco, "Defining Trauma: How Level of Exposure and Proximity Affect Risk of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *American Psychological Association*, 2016, Vol. 8 NO. 2.

to the traumatic event, it does acknowledge the impact of exposure to traumatic details through media (files, audio files, pictures, videos etc.) if that exposure is ‘work-related’.

While a large percentage of the workers examined in this study are exposed to trauma secondarily, a number are at risk of either experiencing or witnessing physical life-threatening trauma through direct interaction with dangerous offenders. These employees, the majority of whom work with offenders in Canada’s federal prison systems, could therefore experience trauma from “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” from either directly experiencing the event or witnessing the event in person as it occurred to others (May and Wisco 2016).⁵

This report addresses the types of trauma, the frequency of exposure and the trauma related support and training employees receive from their employers. Qualitative and quantitative data was gathered from the group of employees who comprise the membership of the Union of Solicitor General Employees. Results of the study show that despite the increased attention by policy makers and, in turn, managers within the 17 federal departments, these workers continue to be at significant risk of secondary trauma due to the repeated exposure to direct trauma and/or written materials which contain horrific details of violence, abuse and death. If meaningful and specifically designed policies are not implemented in a timely way for this group of employees, these individuals are, in USGE’s estimation, at risk of suffering debilitating psychological injury.

⁵ Ibid.

Methodology

The data for this report was gathered through an online survey and individual interviews with current members of the Union of Solicitor General Employees.

Survey methods

English and French online surveys were launched on July 5th, 2016 and remained active until August 8th, 2016. The online survey link was circulated via email to both English and French speaking members of the Union of Solicitor General Employees on July 5th and a reminder email was sent on July 26th, 2016. During the 26-day survey period we received 988 responses to the English survey and 290 responses to our French survey.

The 34 question survey was designed to capture demographic data of USGE members in addition to data related to three main research questions. The three main research questions were: 1) how often are employees exposed to trauma; 2) what is the impact of this exposure; and 3) how are employers mitigating this impact. While the majority of survey questions were designed to gather statistical data related to the main research questions, seven open ended questions gave respondents the opportunity provide their opinions in written format. Many written responses were used to qualify quantitative statistical analyses.

Sample size

The French and English survey responses were combined into a large set of 1,278 responses from Union of Solicitor General Employee members. This represents 8.6% of the USGE's total active membership. Survey data was cleaned and some responses were removed based on 5 categories: 1) data with insufficient responses; 2) respondent completion time; 3) duplicate responses; 4) respondent collaboration; and 5) invalid responses. The cleaning process resulted in the removal of 36 responses thereby reducing the total usable survey responses to 1,242.

The sample used for this study, therefore, represents 8.4% of the USGE's 14,700⁶ members in active jobs. Union of Solicitor General Employees' membership data was retrieved from its member database stored in UnionWare membership software.⁷ The sample size for the online survey was 1,242 out of a population of 14,700. A 95% confidence level will therefore result in a confidence interval of 2.66%. This means that if 50% of the sample responded yes to a 'yes or no' question, the actual results would be 47.34% - 52.66% said yes, 95% of the time.

Participants and sample size

The Union of Solicitor General Employees represents federal public service workers from 17 different departments and agencies within the Government of Canada. USGE members from the following 11

⁶ USGE's membership fluctuates on a daily basis with new employees and those who leave their jobs and in turn cease being members of the union. Fluctuations in membership levels are relatively small, falling between 14,600 and 14,800 active members. While this study focuses on USGE's 14,700 members in active jobs, USGE uses the figure of 16,000 when communicating its active and non-active membership total. This figure includes workers that will shortly be joining the union.

⁷ UnionWare, membership software for unions, www.unionware.com

departments responded to the survey: Canadian Human Rights Commission; Correctional Service of Canada; Courts Administration Service; Justice Canada; Parole Board of Canada; Office of the Information Commissioner of Canada; Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada; Public Prosecutions Service of Canada; Public Safety Canada; Royal Canadian Mounted Police; and Civilian Review and Complaints Commission for the RCMP. USGE members who are employed by the following five departments did not respond to the survey: Canadian Human Rights Tribunal; Canadian Security and Intelligence Service; Commissioner of Canada Elections; the Office of the Commissioner for Federal Judicial Affairs and the Supreme Court of Canada

Survey respondents were heavily represented by employees of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Together these employees combined for 91.8% of all survey responses, with CSC employees responsible for 59.7% of all survey responses (742 out of 1242) and RCMP employees combining for 32.1% of all responses (399 out of 1242). This level of participation aligns to a degree with divisions in USGE’s membership where 81.5% of approximately 14,700 members work either for the CSC (approx. 6,700) or the RCMP (approx. 5,100). Response rates from employees of the Correctional Service of Canada and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police were sufficient to perform departmental regressions.

Based on a confidence level of 95%, the CSC sample of 742 from a population of 6,690 resulted in a confidence interval of 3.39%. This means that if 50% of the CSC sample responded yes to a ‘yes or no’ question, the actual results would be adjusted to 46.61% - 53.39% said yes, 95% of the time.

Based on a confidence level of 95%, the RCMP sample of 399 from a population of 5,000 resulted in a confidence interval of 4.71%. This means that if 50% of the RCMP sample responded yes to a ‘yes or no’ question, the actual results would be 45.29% - 54.71% said yes, 95% of the time.

Given that survey respondents were able to skip questions, sample sizes fluctuated for each set of survey questions. As a result, confidence intervals fluctuate depending on each question.

Table 1 compares USGE membership data by department with the frequency of survey responses from employees of each department.

Table 1 - Frequency of survey responses from USGE members by federal department

	USGE membership by department ⁸	Frequency of survey responses	Survey respondents as percentage of USGE membership
Canadian Human Rights Commission	102	4	3.9
CSC	6,690	742	11.1
Courts Administration Service	301	5	1.6
Justice Canada	1,021	18	0.7
Parole Board of Canada	311	26	8.3
Office of the Information Commissioner of Canada		1	3.4

⁸ USGE’s membership fluctuates on a daily basis with new employees and those who leave their jobs and in turn cease being members of the union.

	USGE membership by department ⁸	Frequency of survey responses	Survey respondents as percentage of USGE membership
Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada	146 ⁹	4	
Public Prosecutions Service of Canada	260	13	
Civilian Review and Complaints Commission for the RCMP	34	6	6.4
Public Safety Canada	522	13	2.4
Royal Canadian Mounted Police	5,000	399	7.9
		1239	
Skipped the question		11	
Total		1242	

Geographic distribution of survey respondents

Survey responses were gathered from employees living in all ten provinces and territories. The distribution of responses by province and territory was very similar to the breakdown of USGE's members by province (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Comparison of USGE membership by province and survey responses by province

	Percentage of USGE members by province	Percentage of survey respondents by province
Alberta	9.3	9.8
British Columbia	14.4	13.0
Manitoba	4.3	7.7
New Brunswick	6.1	6.8
Newfoundland and Labrador	1.3	1.5
Northwest Territories	.37	0.1
Nova Scotia	3.3	2.7
Nunavut	.15	0.1
Ontario	32.3	26.1
Prince Edward Island	.27	0.9
Quebec	19.7	21.7
Saskatchewan	8.3	8.6
Yukon	.33	0.8

⁹ Employees of the Office of the Information Commissioner of Canada and the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada are part of the same USGE union local and are therefore grouped together in the UnionWare database.

Gender division

Survey responses came predominantly from female USGE members (77.5%). This figure is in agreement with the gender division of USGE’s actual membership (see Table 3)

Table 3 – Gender division of USGE membership compared to gender division of survey respondents

	Gender Division of USGE members	Gender division of survey respondents
Female	72.3%	77.5%
Male	27.6%	22.3%
Other		0.2%

Interview Methods

In-depth interviews were conducted with USGE members prior to and during the survey period. A number of interviewees volunteered to participate by responding to a request for participants that was included at the end of the online survey. Other participants volunteered by responding to in-person requests for participation made by the lead researcher at USGE regional conferences. Other interviewees were identified by USGE regional vice presidents as willing participants. Interviews were conducted on the telephone or face to face at USGE conferences or in workplaces.

Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted for this study. The number of interviewees was determined by: a) the number of USGE members who volunteered to participate; b) the saturation of similar answers being shared; and c) the large amount of supplementary data generated from other qualitative methods, notably responses to open ended survey questions.

Data collection

In-depth interviews, conducted by phone or in-person, were based on a series of questions that asked participants about their experiences working with high volumes of written materials, the frequency of traumatic content within this material, the frequency of exposure to direct trauma, how this impacted them personally and professionally and the whether or not they receive training or support from the employer prior, during or after exposure to trauma. Interviews were conversational and lasted between 26 and 53 minutes.

Interviews were reviewed by the lead researcher and transcribed verbatim. A set of themes based on the primary research questions was established in order to retrieve data from transcripts that best elucidate the most important and striking trends that appeared from the survey results and literature review. Supplementary data from open ended survey questions was retrieved, compiled and analysed using the same themes. The goal of the interviews and supplementary survey respondent observations was to examine the personal experiences and responses to exposure to direct and indirect trauma by public safety employees who are members of USGE. In-depth interviews were also useful in gathering anecdotes and information about the broad awareness of and responses to operational stress injuries within the federal public service.

Chapter 1 – Impact of Secondary Trauma

Interviewees and survey respondents were asked to describe different ways that they were impacted by exposure to trauma, directly or secondarily.

Secondary trauma is defined as the emotional, cognitive, and physical consequences of providing professional services to victims or perpetrators of trauma. Symptoms include the recollection, dreams and sudden re-experiencing of the event; avoidance of thoughts, feelings or activities; detachment or estrangement from others and activities; emotional difficulties or outbursts; concentration problems; physiological reaction (difficulty sleeping); and hypervigilance (Figley, 1995).

Through a series of survey questions about personal and professional impacts, respondents provided a clear picture of the psychological and physical toll on certain categories of federal public employees because of their constant exposure to traumatic material.

During follow up one-on-one interviews, individuals talked about how viewing, recording and interacting with ‘traumatic material’ as well as working in high stress environments can fundamentally and negatively impact their lives and the lives of their families.

As we will show in Chapter 2, a high percentage of employees spend the bulk of their work days reading or listening to accounts of violence and trauma, as perpetuated by federally convicted offenders, as well as those in the process of being charged with a crime. Front line RCMP detachment assistants are constantly interacting with the victims or perpetrators of crime, and those indirectly affected by it. This takes on additional significance when one considers the crucial role that RCMP detachments play in providing policing, protection and emergency response services, particularly in rural and remote parts of the country.

Other employees, including institutional and community parole and program officers, as well as case management assistants, work with the intimate details of an offenders’ crime and ‘history of trauma’ to assess their level of risk and potential readiness for a lower security institution, and/or their progress in rehabilitative programs. Many others who work in federal penitentiaries provide essential services in regards to facilities management and food preparation.

For this latter group of employees, it is often necessary to interact directly with offenders, in somewhat unprotected environments, who are required to work alongside these employees as part of their rehabilitative programming.

Setting aside the probability and reality of those employees who are not directly experiencing or witnessing traumatic violence, the majority of federal public service employees who work within Correctional Services of Canada, the RCMP, the Parole Board of Canada and to a lesser extent smaller departments, are at almost constant risk of experiencing the cascading effects of secondary trauma, over many years.

As noted above, “Secondary trauma” is a term used to describe indirect exposure that is secondhand in nature. Within the literature, this term is commonly used to describe indirect exposure occurring through one’s profession. The American Psychological Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM–5) is primarily focused on people who are in close proximity to the traumatic event, it

acknowledges the impact of exposure to traumatic details through media (files, audio files, pictures, videos etc.) if that exposure is ‘work-related’.

This chapter will show how, as a result of the high frequency of exposure to traumatic material and situations, workers have developed symptoms of secondary traumatic stress including:

- **intrusive thoughts, disturbed sleep, stress, anxiety, depression, relationships and changes in basic assumptions about themselves, people, society and safety among others.**

A large majority (79.7%) of respondents who completed USGE’s national survey disclosed experiencing at least some personal impact after viewing traumatic material as part of their job.

Table 4 shows that 22.5% of respondents claimed to have medium personal impact while 13.5% chose high personal impact with another 5.2% saying that viewing this material had a very high impact on their personal lives. A similar number of respondents (76.0%) said that they had experienced at least some personal impact as a result of listening to traumatic stories told to them directly (in person, on the phone or by electronic means) by an offender or client as part of their job.

Table 4 - Personal impact of viewing traumatic material

For those of you who view traumatic material (files, images, audio files, video, etc.) as part of your job: How does viewing this material impact you personally?		
	Frequency	Percent
No impact	30	3.1
Low personal impact	108	11.3
Some personal impact	250	26.2
Medium personal impact	280	29.3
High personal impact	168	17.6
Very high personal impact	64	6.7
N/A	55	5.8
Total	955	100
Skipped the question	287	
	1242	

In Table 5, we can see that a higher percentage of respondents felt personally impacted after listening to traumatic stories with 20.5% of respondents saying that they experienced medium personal impact while 15.1% said the impact was high and another 5.9% saying that it was very high.

When asked how the exposure to, or the possibility of exposure to traumatic or stressful situations within their jobs impacts them personally (see Table 6), 73.2% of respondents said that they experience at least some personal impact. Twenty-seven percent responded to this question saying that they experienced medium personal impact while 21.8% said it was high and another 9% very high.

Table 5 - Personal impact of listening to traumatic stories

For those of you who listen to traumatic stories as told to you directly (in person, on the phone or by electronic means) by an offender or client as part of your job: How do these stories impact you personally?		
	Frequency	Percent
No impact	33	3.4
Low personal impact	114	11.7
Some personal impact	229	23.4
Medium personal impact	254	26
High personal impact	188	19.2
Very high personal impact	73	7.5
N/A	87	8.9
Total	978	100
Skipped the question	264	
	1242	

Table 6- Personal impact of exposure to traumatic situations

For those of you who are exposed to, or could be exposed to, traumatic or stressful situations within your jobs: How does this exposure or the possibility of exposure impact you personally?		
	Frequency	Percent
No impact	29	2.6
Low personal impact	131	11.8
Some personal impact	267	24.1
Medium personal impact	299	27
High personal impact	241	21.8
Very high personal impact	99	9
N/A	40	3.6
Total	1106	100
Skipped the question	136	
	1242	

These responses clearly show that most respondents, and by extension, federal employees in these particular jobs are highly likely to experience at least some personal impact from exposure to trauma from stressful situations and/or reading or hearing distressing stories.

Approximately 25%-30% of respondents said that these working conditions caused high or very high personal impact. Respondents who answered open ended questions as well as interviewees, corroborated this data with alarming stories of how working with trauma interferes with their personal and family lives and impacts their overall worldview.

For example, 80.2% of all survey respondents indicated that they had experienced at least one of the following symptoms as a result of working with traumatic material: insomnia, nightmares, depression, increased consumption of alcohol and drugs, unhealthy eating habits and relationship problems. Table 7

shows that a very high proportion of this group, 69.8% said that they experienced insomnia as a result of working with traumatic material and situations.

Table 7 – Negative impacts of exposure to trauma

As a result of exposure to traumatic material and/or traumatic stories and/or traumatic incidents in your job have you experienced any of the following (respondents could select more than one option)		
	Frequency	Percent
Insomnia	697	69.8
Nightmares	391	39.1
Depression	428	42.8
Alcohol	247	24.7
Drugs	27	2.7
Unhealthy Eating Habits	467	46.7
Relationship problems	377	37.7
Total	998	
Skipped the question	245	
	1243	

When provided with opportunities to comment on other ways that they are impacted by these types of working conditions, survey respondents repeatedly used words such as hyper-vigilance, anxiety, stress, overprotective, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The sections in this chapter will examine responses and interviews from Correctional Service of Canada and RCMP employees.

Secondary trauma experienced by federal public service employees within the RCMP

As will be explained in more detail in Chapter 2, a certain portion of the RCMP’s public service employees who generate or review with written materials, transcribe statements and work in potentially stressful policing environments are frequently exposed to secondary trauma and less regularly to direct trauma. As discussed in the introduction, the impact of this exposure will vary from individual to individual depending on a number of factors including the severity of the traumatic stories and situations, the frequency of exposure and a variety of personal factors that will influence a person’s ability to cope.

Chapter 2, will show how public service employees of the RCMP hear accounts of severe and disturbing trauma from various sources on a regular basis over the course of their jobs. In response to a question about how exposure to trauma from viewing traumatic material (files, images, audio files, video, etc.) as part of their jobs impacts them personally, 78.4% of respondents said that they experienced at least some personal impact. Over half (52.1%) of survey respondents said that they experience, medium, high or very high personal impact from viewing, reading or listening to traumatic material.

The first column of Table 8 contains more details about how public service RCMP workers experience – to use language from the American Psychiatric Association’s description of trauma – “repeated or extreme

exposure to aversive details” of traumatic events.¹⁰

Rates of personal impact for RCMP workers who listen to traumatic stories as told to them directly by members of the public or those who come in for questioning and to make statements either in person or on the phone were slightly lower than the level of impact from reading or viewing traumatic stories.

Table 8 shows how 69.8% of respondents said that they experienced at least some personal impact while 25.3% said that they experienced medium personal impact, 13.8% said the impact was high while 7.7% said it was very high.

Table 8 – Personal impact of exposure to traumatic files, stories and incidents (RCMP)

	For those of you who <u>view traumatic material</u> (files, images, audio files, video, etc.) as part of your job:		For those of you who <u>listen to traumatic stories as told to you directly</u> (in person, on the phone or by electronic means) by an offender or client as part of your job:		For those of you who are <u>exposed to, or could be exposed to, traumatic or stressful situations</u> within your jobs:	
	How does viewing this material impact you personally?		How do these stories impact you personally?		How does this exposure, or the possibility of exposure impact you personally	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
No impact	15	4.6	16	5.1	11	3.2
Low personal impact	37	11.4	43	13.8	54	15.5
Some personal impact	85	26.2	72	23.1	80	23.0
Medium personal impact	102	31.5	79	25.3	93	26.7
High personal impact	48	14.8	43	13.8	59	17.0
Very high personal impact	19	5.9	24	7.7	27	7.8
N/A	18	5.6	35	11.2	24	6.9
Total	324	100	312	100	348	100
Skipped the question	75		87		51	
Total	399		399		399	

For RCMP employees who are exposed to, or could be exposed to, traumatic or stressful situations within their jobs 74.4% said that there is at least some personal impact, 26.7% said there is a medium personal impact, 17.0% said high, while 6.9% said very high.

¹⁰ May and Wisco, “Defining Trauma: How Level of Exposure and Proximity Affect Risk of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” American Psychological Association, 2016, Vol. 8 NO. 2.

Employees' experiences – in their own words

Interviewees and respondents to the survey's open ended questions about personal impacts reported a wide range of ways that the nature of their work affects them individually, not to mention impacts their interactions with family and friends. In many cases, these employees express how this work has developed alterations in "basic assumptions" about themselves, people, society, and safety (McCann and Pearlman, 1990).

For example, a Detachment Services Assistant who reported being exposed to traumatic or stressful situations several times a day and who reported a "very high level of personal impact" said that their "parenting has changed due to traumatic experiences." Another RCMP worker who reported that exposure to trauma had a "very high personal impact" said that they had "started smoking again after 34 years." A worker in one of the RCMP's major crimes units said that they experienced high blood pressure and headaches as a result of the constant exposure to traumatic stories.

Several Detachment Services Assistants who said that they experienced a high personal impact from exposure to traumatic materials and situations reported a sense of grief, increased fear, cynicism and caution. Here are just a few citations:

"Sometimes there is a period of grieving where something stays with you and pops into your mind while you process what happened."

"Hardened cynical response to situations and people."

"Very cautious when out in the public, always aware of my surroundings, uncomfortable when encountering suspects in public..."

Some RCMP traffic accident analysts said that they experience increased fear from everyday activities such as driving.

"I review all traffic fatalities for the RCMP...I find it hard sometimes to drive places without feeling like I'm going to die in a car crash."

"Fear of personal safety in the area I live, have become less trusting."

An RCMP traffic services employee interviewed for this report described how they can still see disturbing pictures in their mind years after working on a specific case.

"Those pictures in that particular file, I found very difficult, and still if I close my eyes, I can still see those pictures, I can see the underwater pictures."

"I have had a few files that have shocked me, files with children tend to be a little more upsetting, especially if they are the same age as my kids...those files stick with you a little bit more, and like I said any file that involves [an RCMP] member, which is an extended family sticks

with you a little bit more and this file with the ambulance really still there, that those ones just don't go away, it's how you deal with it right?"

An information processor mentioned a series of personal and health problems that have arisen due to the exposure to either traumatic material, stories or incidents.

“Decrease in physical well-being, headaches, increased absenteeism, marital problems, using computer games/internet to distract myself, fatigue, loss of sex drive, feelings of helplessness, withdrawing from friends and family.”

Specific impacts

Survey data shows that 75.5% of respondents (see Table 9) experienced at least one of the following symptoms as a result of working with traumatic material: insomnia, nightmares, depression, increased consumption of alcohol and drugs, unhealthy eating habits and relationship problems.

Table 9 - Negative impacts of exposure to trauma for RCMP public service employees (RCMP)

As a result of exposure to traumatic material and/or traumatic stories and/or traumatic incidents in your job have you experienced any of the following (you can choose more than one)		
	Frequency	Percentage
Insomnia	200	66.2
Nightmares	98	32.4
Depression	130	43.0
Increased consumption of alcohol	38	12.5
Increased consumption of drugs	3	.9
Unhealthy eating habits	147	48.6
Relationship problems	90	29.8
Total	302	
Skipped	98	
Total	399	

According to USGE’S survey findings, 66.2% percent of respondents who work for the RCMP experience insomnia and 32.4 percent dealt with nightmares as a result of exposure to traumatic material, stories or incidents.

The percentage of employees surveyed by USGE who say that they are suffering from insomnia as a result of the work that they are asked to do is very high. Indeed, Figley notes that physiological reactions to trauma - including insomnia – and dreams are symptoms of secondary trauma.¹¹

¹¹ Figley, C.R. (1995). Compassion Fatigue as secondary traumatic stress disorder: An overview in C.R. Figley (ED.), Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized (pp 1-20). London, England: Brunner-Routledge Press.

In response to a question about the impact of the trauma experienced in their job, and whether or not they suffered from insomnia, a Detachment Services Assistant who was interviewed for this report said the following:

“Yah, probably thinking too much when you get home, you know, or after your day, thinking too much about things that went on, because it bothers, it has to bother you if you're a human being if you see something that's happening to somebody else that shouldn't happen you know.”

How often were you experiencing insomnia?

“Um, it depends on the day, I mean if it was a particularly ah, rough day in terms of the types of things you were dealing with. I mean it could be a couple of nights a week, right? It depends on the situation.”

An RCMP forensic laboratory assistant who handles and analyzes evidence for ongoing investigations and trials and is exposed to trauma by repeatedly reading the case files attached to each piece of evidence, described having trouble sleeping and experiencing nightmares as a result of their exposure:

“When I first started, it was definitely... there was a lot of insomnia, um, and just you know, and nightmares, but I think as time has gone by you get kind of jaded a little bit desensitized um... so and now I think, yeah, there's disturbing imagery so that'll... it just pops up into your head at random times.”

Another DSA who has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of their work, mentioned sleeping problems and nightmares as part of their process of recognizing that they were suffering from the traumatic nature of their work.

“It would get to the point where the anxiety would take my breath away when I would start thinking about certain things. And then it led to, you know, not sleeping properly and having nightmares about different stuff and I think that's when I was starting to become a little bit more aware of it, but like anybody it's like “no I'm fine” and yeah... and I kind of just tried to work through it for quite a while and then um, it just increased you know with intensity, all of those things, the worrying, the anxiety, the sleeping.”

When talking about the severity of their nightmares, one DSA described how working in a small town resulted in dreaming about acquaintances.

“I've had some really, really horrible nightmares about some of the stuff that I've seen in pictures and I mean and this is a small town so these are pictures of things that have happened to people that I know.”

i. Recollection of events and intrusive thoughts

Interviewees were asked if they had seen files or experienced events that they would regularly recollect. Some of the interviewees described not being able to forget certain files of horrific abuse, violence and sexual abuse. One RCMP employee who works as an analyst with a violent crimes unit talked about a particularly disturbing file that continues to cause them distress.

“I did some research to find an offender some years ago ...I stumbled onto some files that were of some priest up north from back in the day, and um, he was ah, engaging in bestiality and making the kids watch.... um, he would get violent with the kids and knock them out, sodomize

them... um yeah, that one really bothered it was... um, it was just so brutal. I didn't see photos of that, so basically you know the case files are so detailed in vi class, I mean it paints a pretty vivid picture. That was definitely one that to this day kind of chokes me up.”

This same worker described how the frequent exposure to these types of files has made them withdrawn, impacted their sex life, made them more vigilant, un-trusting and created a dark sense of humour.

“I think that my sense of humour has gotten darker, you know things that might shock people might be funny to me. Um, I also often look at strangers and immediately think there's something wrong with them or wonder if they're perverts. Um, so kind of like a hyper vigilance type of uh, yeah it's hard to explain, it's almost like everybody's suspicious, right? Um, it's affected me in the fact that some days I go home and think about that. Um, right, and I'm quiet and I don't want to talk and ah, it affects my love life some days. Um, yeah, it's you know it's kind of where things surface and you might chew on it for a few days and then it goes away, but during those couple of days I'm kind of withdrawn and a little bit off and yah.”

A DSA explained how the cumulative effect of the large volume of transcriptions of statements from sexual assault victims changed their view of religion.

“It changed my outlook on the church, personally right, it like it soured me really. Because, and then I said, well if there's this group of individuals who for some reason, cause back in the day the priest was like god, you never said no to the priest or anything. It soured you from the church. I think what soured me most was the fact that the people in, who were more or less these priests' supervisors did nothing about it, and they knew it and they just swept it under the rug. you know and I think that's, that bothered me and I guess it bothered the general population too, I mean it's not just me, but they didn't see the stories right? You know, and so I guess this is a little more profound for me that way. But uh, yes I can put things away.”

Another DSA based in the North explained that the majority of the transcriptions that they do involve violent crime. One particular transcription had a lasting effect.

“As far as listening to things, yeah there was one over in one of the other communities where the dad killed the mom in front of the little kids and then he had rounded up the 4 and 6 year olds and were asking them what happened and that was heartbreaking.”

One interviewee explained how the impact of disturbing files was greater earlier in their career.

“You know when I first started here they really they really bothered me. There was one incident where a fellow...was I guess partying with a bunch of people and they ended up bringing him into our area and they ended up killing him...And that was when I first started working here, and that stuck with me for a long time and then um, the people who were in custody, they were bringing them back and forth for court and so when they were bringing them to appear in court, I had to call in sick a couple of times. It was such a violent murder like, it was just, I couldn't handle it hey? That incident really had an effect on me right from the beginning. But mind you I was brand new, I had no idea that, like you know you watch things on tv, but tv and real life you don't realize they're really, really similar. That one had a big effect on me. But yeah, now things just kind of run off my shoulders and I just carry on.”

A DSA with 12 years' experience explained how they were impacted by a situation where they were unable to prevent a suicide.

"You know, there was another one, another violent suicide where uh, yeah, just miscommunication and it just sticks with me. It was about 5 years ago and you know the girlfriend phoned in and said, you know she believes her boyfriend might do this and he was between here and XXXX¹² somewhere, and you know she never sounded real upset and so you know you kinda just maybe didn't take it too seriously, and then the day goes on and they didn't know if he was in XXXX which is 20 miles away, or if he was here or where he was and, so there were messages going to the XXXX detachment and there were messages going to us and there was nothing coming together and then, then the pressure's on. And so it always stuck in your head and it ended up he was in our area out on a road a mile east of town. Blew his head off. And it's always at the back of your mind, if we woulda worked better together would the guy still be alive, you know? That kinda always sticks with you, geez did I move fast enough with this information, getting the guys out there fast enough to...but you'll never know, it's nothing that you'll ever know, that you could have done something better or coulda done something quicker. That life might have been saved. And I guess those are the most, the ones that really stick with you. Those kinds of situations."

While this same DSA says that they can mostly deal with working with traumatic material and situations, they did explain that they notice an increase in alcohol consumption.

"Well, I, I mean I have a fairly strong personality and I'm able to deal with it. Maybe one too many beers at home after I leave work, just to kinda go (exhales deeply), do that business. And you know that's part of it too, you know, maybe, that alcohol...has increased just to wash it away out of your mind just for the day or whatever. And that's a part of it too. How you're dealing with it and maybe this is, could be a problem down the road if I don't, maybe, I think I'm dealing with it. I think I'm, you know, it's not bothering me, but you don't know that for sure, and it'll come out in different ways maybe, physical health or mental health or this kind of thing. Substance abuse anything like that and uh...compared to 12 years ago, I probably do drink more now than I used to. Is it because of this? Possibly."

ii. Alterations in basic assumptions

Numerous RCMP survey respondents and interviewees described how their work had altered the way they perceive society. Many said that due to the work that they do, they feel as if anybody could be a perpetrator or that perverts are waiting around every corner. RCMP employees explained how they had developed a sense of distrust, overprotectiveness and hyper vigilance over the course of their careers.

Many survey respondents and interviewees described having developed a strong sense of mistrust and hypervigilance. Shared by employees from a wide range of positions in the RCMP, stories of mistrust and hypervigilance demonstrate how basic assumptions about personal safety, the safety of friends and family and safety in public spaces can be significantly altered as a result of exposure to stories about horrendous acts of violence. Separated by job title, the following quotes were shared by survey respondents and interviewees:

¹² Place names were removed to protect anonymity

Criminal Intelligence Analyst - "Fear of the unknown, crowds, etc. - constant checking over shoulder."

Applicant Processing Team Lead - "As a result of this exposure in a previous position, which still sometimes has an impact, I have a heightened fear for my daughter as she grows up and it's brought back memories from my own personal traumatic experiences."

DSA - "It's difficult to talk with family members once at home so in my case I get very quiet. I can also get very anxious about where my adult children/grandchildren are and what they are doing, so overprotective with their lives."

Traffic Services Assistant - "Fear of personal safety in the area I live, have become less trusting."

DSS - "Very cautious when out in the public, always aware of my surroundings, uncomfortable when encountering suspects in public."

DSA - "Distrust, excessive caution, worry."

Criminal Intelligence Clerk - "I am paranoid that a pervert is going to get my kid/nieces/nephews, that perverts are lurking everywhere children are. I have developed a more critical eye of strangers and their motives. I am a bit paranoid."

Junior Statistical Analyst, Operations Strategy Branch – "Heighten fear in public and every-day life."

National Client Services Agent - "Increased fear of being at work and entering and exiting the building. Trouble sleeping some nights but not quite insomnia."

RCMP analyst – "It has definitely affected the way I view the world, the way I view strangers, um I always will tend to think the worst of people before, unless they prove me wrong."

Detachment Services Assistant – "I think over time, it does affect you, absolutely, there's no if's or but's about it, raising two step-kids, you're going to a grocery store and you see some of your clients and you know what they have done and you know, that rubs off on your kids. You have the kids here at the lake and your more protective because you know what's going on out there, you, you're more...you just don't trust the world or society as much. Your more skeptic...you try to put more them in a bubble more which affects them. If you don't have, I feel sorry for the people who don't have somebody, a close friend, a spouse, somebody to go home to, to just kind of have that safe place otherwise, there's just no way."

Detachment Services Assistant – "It was affecting my home life and with my children um, I was scared to let my kids leave the house, you know in fear that every single thing that I've dealt with is going to happen to them too."

Detachment Services Assistant – “Yeah like, I guess you're just more overly cautious about things. Things you would never have thought about before, um, just hearing things that go on here like, the violent acts where they're taking place you try to avoid certain areas of town, you try to, I don't know, you just try to keep a low profile like you don't go out and have fun like you used to just because you're so leery about the activities that are going on in these areas you know? Um, it's kind of hard to explain. but you know even when my kids, my kids I had teenagers when I first started working here and I mean they'd be going out doing this with their friends and that and I would be worried sick because more so when I started working here than before because I didn't know of all the stuff that was going on, once you get in here it's like oh my god you constantly worry about, and of course you can't say anything, you could tell them to be careful and whatever else, but I mean you can't, can't, tell them the things that you know right?”

RCMP Forensic Laboratory Assistant – “I think yeah there's disturbing imagery so that'll it just pops up into your head at random times, um I'm definitely, it's made me a lot more anxious and cautious in you know public in my regular day, regular life.”

Secondary trauma experienced by federal public employees within the Correctional Service of Canada

Not surprisingly, federal public service employees represented by USGE who work within the Correctional Service of Canada also experience pervasive levels of secondary trauma, including persistent and high levels of anxiety, stress, hypervigilance, insomnia, depression, nightmares, social withdrawal, lack of trust, increased consumption of alcohol, among others, associated with working with traumatic material and within a traumatic penitentiary environment.

In fact, compared to RCMP employees, those who work in federal corrections reported a significantly higher rate of personal impact. In response to the question about the personal impact of viewing traumatic material including files, images, videos and audio files, 82.9% of respondents said that they experienced at least some personal impact. A slightly lower percentage (80.5%) of respondents said that they had experienced at least some personal impact from directly listening to traumatic stories either in person, on the phone or by electronic means. A very high rate (87.8) of respondents said that they experienced at least some personal impact from being exposed directly to traumatic or stressful situations within their jobs.

Table 10 shows that a high percentage of survey respondents were personally affected by viewing traumatic material, listening to traumatic stories and experiencing traumatic situations as part of their jobs.

Table 10 – Personal impact of exposure to traumatic files, stories and incidents (CSC)

	For those of you who <u>view traumatic material</u> (files, images, audio files, video, etc.) as part of your job:		For those of you who <u>listen to traumatic stories as told to you directly</u> (in person, on the phone or by electronic means) by an offender or client as part of your job:		For those of you who are <u>exposed to, or could be exposed to, traumatic or stressful situations</u> within your jobs:	
	How does viewing this material impact you personally?		How do these stories impact you personally?		How does this exposure, or the possibility of exposure impact you personally	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
No impact	11	1.9	11	1.8	11	1.6
Low personal impact	54	9.5	65	10.7	60	8.8
Some personal impact	151	26.6	142	23.4	174	25.6
Medium personal impact	170	29.9	170	28.1	192	28.2
High personal impact	109	19.2	131	21.6	165	24.2
Very high personal impact	41	7.2	45	7.4	67	9.8
N/A	32	5.6	42	6.9	12	1.8
Total	568	100	606	100	681	100
Skipped the question	174		136		61	
Total	742		742		742	

This higher rate of personal impact compared to RCMP respondents is not surprising given that the majority of these employees¹³ work within penitentiary environments. One institutional Parole Officer described how challenging it is to work in a prison setting saying that “it is such a negative, toxic and sometimes unfathomable environment to work in.”

A high number of survey respondents (85.7%) said that as a result of exposure to traumatic material, stories or incidents that they had experienced either insomnia, nightmares, depression, increased consumption of drugs or alcohol, unhealthy eating habits or relationship problems (see Table 11).

¹³ 92.4% of CSC employee survey respondents said that they work within penitentiary environments.

Table 11 - Negative impacts of exposure to trauma (CSC)

As a result of exposure to traumatic material and/or traumatic stories and/or traumatic incidents in your job have you experienced any of the following (you can choose more than one)		
	Frequency	Percentage
Insomnia	457	72.0
Nightmares	279	44.0
Depression	265	41.7
Increased consumption of alcohol	191	30.1
Increased consumption of drugs	19	2.9
Unhealthy eating habits	294	46.3
Relationship problems	264	41.6
Total	634	
Skipped	108	
Total	742	

Seventy-two percent of respondents said that they suffered from insomnia while 44% experienced nightmares due to the trauma to which they are exposed to in their jobs.

Specific Impacts – in the words of employees

CSC employees provided frequent accounts that working directly with offenders within institutions and the community, combined with the constant exposure to disturbing files was interfering with their personal lives. Insomnia, distrust, hypervigilance, nightmares, unhealthy habits (increase alcohol consumption) and over- protectiveness were reported by this group.

Interviewees and survey respondents regularly mentioned how intrusive thoughts led to problems with sleeping, including insomnia and nightmares. An Institutional Parole Officer explained how their family life was impacted from working with a sex offender:

“I find that I can't sleep and I think about things way too much when I am in the comfort of my own home with my three healthy and wonderful sons. How can I sit at work and have to read and interact with a pedophile whose victim pool is that of boys ages 6-11 when my boys are 6, 8 and 11 years of age? You can't hit closer to home than that. And I have to act professional and listen to his on-going bullshit. But I do because it is my job and I am professional. However, tell me how that doesn't influence or impact my personal life when I am subjected to those types of inmates on a daily basis. It is very hard and I find that it is affecting my health, my mental state and just my general disposition.”

One CSC employee who works as an assistant to the Security Intelligence Officer and is responsible for compiling, writing and filing all incident reports for the institution explained how file content enters into their dreams.

“I do have dreams about stuff I write and running, running, running, all in my dreams always running away, um some days, yes, last year I was very low and it was hard to come in and type these.”

This employee also described taking medication to help with sleeping:

“I take sleeping pills every night to get to sleep so you don't think about what you've just written that day.”

In response to a question about whether or not they suffered from insomnia an institutional Parole Officer responded:

“Oh yeah, wicked. I'm hardly awake today, I'm out of it this morning, I have insomnia.”

The same parole officer indicated that they had vivid dreams about work experiences:

“I have woken up screaming in the night because I thought I was going through the same experience again... literally screamed out in the night, my wife lying right beside me... literally scared her half to death. The last one was so vivid it was just unbelievable, I've never done that like just screamed out the night before.”

An intake Parole Officer who is responsible for assessing one offender at a time as they enter federal penitentiaries described how a particular meeting with an offender soon after he had been involved in the killing of another inmate led to a severe psychological reaction in the form of a vivid nightmare. The Parole Officer did not witness the incident, but spoke face to face with the offender soon after as part of an intake assessment for the original sentence. At the time of the interview, the Parole Officer was aware of the traumatic details of the murder:

“So I did talk to him and he answered my questions and, he kept wanting to talk about the murder and position himself in a position of self defence. Now my job as an intake Parole Officer has absolutely nothing to do with what he may or may not have committed and in fact I'd been directed that any time he tries to talk to me about it to refer him to the RCMP...So that case did eventually get wrapped up and done but what happened to me was like I said, it was weighing heavily on me and I don't know that I realized how heavily it was weighing on me until you know, my partner shakes me in the middle of the night and says you're screaming, are you ok?...and I'm having this very vivid dream that I've gone to see him in segregation and somehow, someway even though it's really not possible for this to happen, he's able to grab me hold me and say, hey bitch I've got nothing to lose! And you know he's serving his sentence a life sentence for manslaughter, he'll be convicted very likely of first or second degree murder, but what else are they going to do to him.”

As previously noted, all of these reported experiences and impacts can be considered symptoms of secondary traumatic stress. The voices of survey respondents indicate the nature and extent of the personal impact of repeated exposure to traumatic material and stressful working conditions.

While many of the following stories express similar experiences they have been separated into the following general category of symptom: hypervigilance, alcohol/drug consumption, mistrust, desensitization, physical illness, and general fear and anxiety. In many cases the following stories indicate how this work can alter employees' basic assumptions about themselves, people, society, and safety.

i. Hypervigilance:

Parole Officer – “Adoption of particular habits such as sitting with your back to the wall in a public place, (scrutiny of my setting, vigilance.)”

Parole Officer – “Apprehensive about walking in isolated halls or elevator in apartments or taking out garbage or going to car or for walks alone after reading and hearing graphic accounts of horrendous, unprovoked violence against strangers, especially women. Now much more wary anywhere, and super vigilant, or avoid downtown streets - day or eve. This is life-limiting re going out for walks to exercise, socialize, etc.”

Institutional Parole Officer – “Hyper vigilance cynicism jaded worldview.”

Institutional Parole Officer – “Hyper vigilance, jumpiness, more aware of my personal space.”

Institutional Parole Officer – “On high alert at all times, fearing new situations, always taking stock of who is around, over analyzing situations, perceiving potential threats, lack of trust, constant suspicion of everything, never able to truly relax and be at peace.”

ii. Increased alcohol consumption and smoking:

Food Services worker – “I am a recovering alcoholic and stress was a high factor in my use of alcohol to cope.”

Community Parole Officer – “I started smoking as a coping mechanism for this job. I now have smoked nearly a pack a day for 4 years. It is killing me.”

Executive Assistant to Warden – “I have turned to alcohol, lots not currently right now...but I definitely had months and months where ok, what you do is go home and drink until you don't remember anything anymore and it's just happy happy.”

Correctional Program Officer – “The strategy was to hang out with your co-workers, vent and drink. That's the culture.”

iii. Flash backs:

Trades person – “Flash back from inmate cutting his fingers off.”

Information retrieval unit coordinator – “Flashbacks, Facial tics, Uncontrollable weeping.”

iv. Mistrust:

Community Parole Officer – “Impacted the manner in which I view my environment. It has limited my trust in society in general. I struggle to trust others or allow them to get them to know me or my family. I avoid going to malls, movies or other events where there are large groups of people. I have become increasingly introverted.”

Correctional Program Officer – “Distrust for people who likely have good intentions.”

Institutional Parole Officer – “Treating others like inmates, "helicopter mom" always wary of strangers and the unknown; inability to trust; insist on CPIC checks for every member of my babysitter's family and insist on meeting the parents of the other children to ensure that mine are safe; withdrawal from daily activities and isolation; feelings of loneliness because some cases just can't be talked about with colleagues because they are too traumatic.”

Correctional Program Officer – “You don't trust people anymore, you think that the world is negative and um everyone is, there's a lot of bad people out there, you know your world view

changes um. Kind of to the point where I was actually paranoid. Let's call it what it is. And uh, you become hyper vigilant and people on the street have, that looks like an inmate and you know. Only once I got out of the job, like when I started at the staff college and I remember a couple of years, it was a couple of years after I was out of being a Parole Officer and I was on a, it's funny I was on an airplane going to Ottawa for something and somebody just helped me bring my bag down from overhead like. and it reminded me that people in general are nice like they're not all out to get you or do bad things, but when you're in that environment, all you see are and you deal with are the nasty people that the rest of society don't want to deal and you just start to think there's a lot of them out there."

v. Physical illness:

Aboriginal Program Officer – "Mood swings, isolation from family members, decreased motivation to take care of self, physical illness (headaches, muscle tension, excess stress)."

Aboriginal Program Officer – "Low energy not wanting to do anything after work feeling emotionally, mentally and physically drained."

Community Parole Officer – "Feeling hopeless to help those affected, the government agenda does not support the wellness of staff and this is very concerning and stressful environment to work in. I have suffered physical ailments such as headaches, and re-occurring diarrhea as a result of work stress."

vi. Desensitization:

Correctional Program Officer – "After the first six months you don't get nervous anymore you just go in and ask the questions. And then you become numb like I said to the material. your like oh! the person only stabbed twelve times that's not too bad, you know that kind of stuff, cause some of the stuff you see like people who are getting tortured, your like ha it's really bizarre what happens but that's apparently quite common."

vii. Fear and anxiety:

Assistant to the Security Intelligence Officer – "When I go home I'm scared to death, and scared to leave my house and scared to answer the door. I'm very jumpy when I go out. Even downtown on the weekend I was flipping out, you know, being in town, and just walking around with everybody, I was flipping out, thinking I was afraid that someone was going to jump out at me throw bleach in my face, not that it's ever happened, but this is what I think when I'm out. And I'm always on guard. I always feel I have to be ready to throat punch, something, somebody in case they attack any one I'm with. It's this crazy feeling I have."

Community Parole Officer – "Anxiety, hypersensitivity regarding safety in ordinary situations. Hypersensitivity towards safety in the community."

Teacher – "Impacts how I interact in public, create aversions to objects, locations, etc. that remind me of trauma and make me feel unsafe."

Sentence Management Officer – "I am overprotective of my family and friends."

Aboriginal Program Officer – “Paranoia, especially toward my children, afraid when alone at home.”

Discussion and analysis

A high percentage of CSC and RCMP employees who willingly participated in this study either through an interview or by responding to the survey described having been personally impacted from the work that they perform. Many of the impacts are consistent with symptoms of secondary trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, vicarious trauma and burnout. Due to the exposure to trauma from their jobs, workers reported experiencing hypervigilance, insomnia, nightmares, depression, pervasive thoughts, distrust, anxiety, fear, paranoia along with relationship problems, increased consumption of alcohol, and unhealthy eating habits.

The survey data descriptions from employees presented in this chapter illustrates how exposure to trauma from a variety of sources can produce negative impacts on a wide range of employees from those who spend their days in an office to those who work in high stress penitentiary environments or with offenders in the community.

As will be discussed in chapter three, these public safety workers not only find it challenging to personally cope with stress from their work and the symptoms of trauma exposure, but struggle with a lack of support from the employer either through preventative measures, training, or from employee assistance programs.

Chapter 2 – Frequency and type of exposure

In our survey, we asked USGE members how much of their day is typically spent working with written files or statements. Results showed that, 92.5% of employees across all departments work with written material or statements during a typical workday. In Table 12 we see that the majority of respondents are working with written materials or statements for more than 4 hours of their typical workdays.

Table 12 – Time spent working with written files

How much of your workday is typically spent working with written files and/or statements?		
	Frequency	Percent
I never work with this type of material	92	7.4
Less than 1 hour	120	9.7
1-2 hours	139	11.3
2-4 hours	222	18
4-6 hours	338	27.4
More than 6 hours	324	26.2
Total	1235	100
Skipped the question	7	
	1242	

In order to determine the quantity of traumatic content seen by employees, we asked respondents how often the written files or statements that they work are traumatic. Table 13 shows that the vast majority, 84.7%, of respondents are exposed to traumatic content within these written files and statements. The survey data demonstrates that more than half of respondents are reading, looking at, or listening to traumatic files or statements at least several times a week. Over a quarter of respondents (26.1%) said that they are exposed several times a day.

Table 13 – Frequency of exposure to traumatic content

How often are you exposed to traumatic content within this material?		
	Frequency	Percent
I am never exposed to traumatic files, images or videos	188	15.3
Less than once per month	145	11.8
Once per month	60	4.9
Several times a month	168	13.6
Once per week	35	2.8
Several times a week	270	21.9
Once a day	45	3.7
Several times a day	321	26.1
Total	1232	100
System	10	
	1242	

Survey data demonstrates that across all departments employees listen to stories of trauma abuse, violence, sexual abuse fatal accidents or suicide. Table 14 illustrates how a large number of employees listen to stories like these several times a week (22.5%) and even several times a day (27.4%).

Table 14 – Frequency of exposure to stories of trauma

In your job, how often do you listen to stories of trauma such as abuse, violence, sexual abuse, fatal accidents, or suicide?		
	Frequency	Percent
In my job I never listen to stories of trauma	152	12.3
Less than once a month	133	10.7
Once a month	61	4.9
Several times a month	194	15.7
Once a week	37	3
Several times a week	280	22.6
Once a day	42	3.4
Several times a day	339	27.4
Total	1238	100
System	4	
	1242	

Frequency of exposure experienced by federal public service employees within the RCMP

In response to the question ‘how often are you exposed to traumatic or stressful situations during the course of your job’ (Table 15) 64.0% of the respondents who are employed by the RCMP responded by saying, once a week or more. Over 40% (40.7%) said that this exposure occurred more than several times a week while 13.5% said that they were exposed to traumatic or stressful situations in during the course of their jobs several times a day.

Table 15 – Frequency of exposure to traumatic situations (RCMP)

How often are you exposed to traumatic or stressful situations during the course of your job?		
	Frequency	Percent
I am never exposed to traumatic situations during the course of my job	44	11.1
Less than once a month	67	17.0
Once a month	31	7.8
Several times a month	76	19.2
Once a week	16	4.1
Several times a week	94	23.8
Once a day	13	3.3
Several times a day	54	13.7
Total	395	100
Skipped the question	4	
	399	

The majority of these stressful or traumatic situations occur while reading files or listening to and transcribing statements. Survey data showed that 68.9% of respondents spent more than 2 hours per day working with written files and/or statements. Many respondents (29.1%) said that they spend more than 6 hours working with files and/or statements (Table 16). This is not a surprise given that as clerical and administrative staff, this is a large part of these workers’ job descriptions.

Table 16 – Time spent working with files (RCMP)

How much of your workday is typically spent working with written files and/or statements?		
	Frequency	Percent
I never work with this type of material	38	9.6
Less than 1 hour	40	10.1
1-2 hours	42	10.6
2-4 hours	53	13.4
4-6 hours	106	26.8
More than 6 hours	116	29.4
Total	395	100.0
Skipped the question	4	
	399	

In response to a question about how they are exposed to trauma in their jobs, a Detachment Services Assistant described it as follows: “I would say mostly, you know through, pictures, transcribing, phone calls but there has been some where it's been direct.” In order to discover how much of the material that this group was working with is traumatic, our survey asked ‘How often are you exposed to traumatic content within this material?’ The responses (Table 17) showed that 45.3% of respondents were exposed to traumatic content in their daily jobs several times a week or more. Twenty percent of respondents said that they were exposed to traumatic content several times a day.

Table 17 – Frequency of exposure to traumatic content within files (RCMP)

How often are you exposed to traumatic content within this material?		
	Frequency	Percent
I am never exposed to traumatic files, images or videos	68	17.1
Less than once per month	53	13.4
Once per month	28	7.1
Several times a month	57	14.4
Once per week	10	2.5
Several times a week	88	22.2
Once a day	14	3.5
Several times a day	79	19.9
Total	397	100
Skipped the question	2	
	399	

In response to a question about the frequency of exposure to traumatic material, one RCMP worker responded: “so basically on a daily basis I read homicides and sex assaults all day long.” Their level of exposure was so great that they had developed a hierarchy of normal versus abnormal sexual assaults. They further explained: “I would say that probably at least once every two weeks, uh, maybe even weekly I come across a file that just...it is like either with a child or somebody's used a broomstick or you know, things that are really kind of in my mind what I would put outside of a normal sexual assault, I guess? Um, yeah. So I would say it's probably once a week maybe once every two weeks I would see a file like that.”

A Detachment Services Assistant described the frequency of dealing with files this way: "It's not a daily occurrence but it's at least once a week, at least once a week in the summer time for sure. Where we have an occurrence and then we have to get the ball rolling with you know doing the transcriptions and typing up information, and reviewing files and stuff."

In response to the question about frequency of exposure to traumatic files, another Detachment Services Assistant told us:

"You would probably see something every day, to prepare, and it depends on um your duties, in terms of court preparation. In some places they only do the court document that uh, sets the charge and the release document. In some places they prepare the whole court package that has to go forward for court, and of course if you do that then everything is disclosed, so that's pictures, statements, statements have to be transcribed and all these kinds of things. So yeah, I could say that I dealt with something like that three days out of five a week."

She continued saying:

"And transcriptions, I mean I've done transcriptions of sexual assaults on children, and I can remember when all of the, that was back I guess in the 80s, the priests, right? And ah, assaulting young boys. The file we had was this thick right? My co-worker and I, I guess that's what we'd be doing all day, we'd be transcribing these statements from these boys, right, about what was done to them and you go home in the evening and you (blows out air), it was ah, it was just over and over and over again...we did that for weeks and weeks and weeks, and everything then, everything had to be typed and sent so, there was statement after statement after statement, it was the same thing over and over and over that these poor people were exposed to."

Another Detachment Services Assistant told us:

"I don't transcribe everyday but certainly a couple of times a week, a couple of days a week, sometimes more. Last week it was every day because somebody forgot they had court over in one of the other detachments, so they needed all of their statements doing like right now, so that was a bit of a long week, but a lot yeah."

Another Detachment Services Assistant's told us:

"Every day. It totally depends what you're doing with the file but because we have the members who are working on night shift, they will send a nightly occurrence log and then the members who are working on the day shift will send out a daily occurrence log. So you're still getting an update as to every file that is going on but I don't have to look at every file to determine the traumatic experience per say but you're still getting like a break down preview of it and then getting the file ready for court or every file that is done, I have to break it down and discard the duplicate papers."

Graphic and nature of the trauma

In addition to the high rates of exposure to files, situations and stories, exposure to incredibly graphic and stressful stories is very frequent. Over two thirds (66.4%) of survey respondents who work for the RCMP said that they listen to stories of trauma such as abuse, violence, sexual abuse, fatal accidents or suicide at least several times a month (Table 18). Close to one quarter (24.3%) said that they are exposed to these types of stories several times a day. For the most part, these workers are exposed to these stories when

they read victim statements, offender files, case files or when speaking on the telephone. These workers, are regularly exposed to secondary trauma.

Table 18 – Frequency of exposure to traumatic stories (RCMP)

In your job, how often do you listen to stories of trauma such as abuse, violence, sexual abuse, fatal accidents, or suicide?		
	Frequency	Percent
In my job I never listen to stories of trauma	59	14.9
Less than once a month	53	13.4
Once a month	22	5.6
Several times a month	63	15.9
Once a week	7	1.8
Several times a week	82	20.7
Once a day	13	3.3
Several times a day	97	24.5
Total	396	100
System	3	
	399	

These employees work in policing environments and handle files from the mundane to the most horrific. When asked about some of the more difficult and challenging files that they have been exposed to in their jobs, RCMP workers described graphic situations of trauma and abuse. One Detachment Services Assistant said:

“There are some of the transcribing that um, you know a few of the statements that really stand out to me, you know like I could still hear the peoples' voices, you know when you're listening to somebody's voice telling their own story, you know that kind of stays with you, haunts you a little bit and um there was the incident, one of the ones was a motor vehicle accident that I took you know. And emergency call about a motor vehicle accident where there was like you know fatality and it was somebody I knew, you know.”

“I've transcribed many many statement over the years so I've become desensitized to it all, but my first couple statements and it stays with me now, is a poor young teenage girl was brutally raped by her brother in her own home on Christmas eve. So every single Christmas eve, I myself think about that poor girl, even to this day every Christmas eve, I'm like, I wonder how that girl is doing this year. 'Cause I had to transcribe this, not like, it's not like when you read a file like if for review a file in a city detachment, I actually had to hear her voice and hear her tell her story, and that sticks with you forever, that kind of thing. The member took her audio statement and it was sent to me to transcribe it and have it ready for court.”

Detachment Services Assistants typically work and live in the same community. Most of these communities are small to medium size and most people know each other. Another stress for these workers is that they know the victims in the statements that they are transcribing or in the court files that they are preparing.

“It's a small detachment, small community, so you know people, so back in the day you would actually have film that would get, that they would print out, photos or whatever, so we'd send

the film out and whoever, Ottawa would produce it and bring it back and it was my idea to label the film and stuff like that and put all of the photos in order in the files. Well unfortunately one of the photos was umm... a good friend of mine's son who was killed in a severe car accident and it was up to me to label the photos and process them and everything. So after that I was like kind of upset about that and then somebody came to me later, oh you know you didn't have to do that... you could have had somebody else do it. Nobody tells me cause that's my job."

An important task performed by RCMP Detachment Services Assistants is to answer phone calls in the detachment. While most areas of the country under the jurisdiction of the RCMP are covered by a system of 911 call centres, some residents of smaller communities choose to call the local detachment in an emergency.

This can lead to situations where DSAs must act as emergency telecommunications operators, in many cases receiving calls from people in the community that they know. Research examining the mental health impact of exposure to traumatic events in 911 telecommunicators suggest that being exposed to duty-related trauma may lead to the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder given the lack of control over emergency situations.¹⁴ Lilly and Pierce suggest that while telecommunicators are separated from the physical scene and are not personally threatened, this distance might not buffer them from the development of post-traumatic stress.¹⁵ This research has not examined the impact on telecommunicators when the emergency that is being dealt with involves a friend, acquaintance or family member of the worker.

Some of the Detachment Services Assistants that were interviewed explained their experiences answering emergency telephone calls:

"If they call.... what is sort of our version of 911, they get a dispatcher in Iqaluit who then asks them a whole bunch of questions, and I know everybody, and if they call and say it's such and such and my cousin is doing this, I can say, ok are you at home, yes and I, can you know, send somebody, I don't have to go through 'what's your name' what's your cousin's name, what's your address, what's your birthday, um... and so we get a lot of calls here where people just want to cut out that questioning part of the dispatching. So they'll call and say... send the police to such and such an address, and I'll just get off the phone and say, ok you're going here."

"I think the worst calls I have to deal with is when people are calling and saying their child's missing. Like we're talking like a toddler, like a 3 or 4 or 5 year or their six-year old didn't make it home from school. Just the parent's anxiety, 'cause I can imagine my six-year-old was missing. I find those calls very difficult to deal with, trying to calm the parent down."

"In my workday I may take a call and I did take several calls from motor vehicle accidents where people are dead. When you work in a detachment in an area where you live you know a lot of these people or you know something about them or they're from a community close to you. So, yes it does affect you in that you know within the, uh, it does affect you because you know families."

¹⁴ Pierce, H. Lilly, M., "Duty-Related Trauma Exposure in 911 Telecommunicators: Considering the Risk for Posttraumatic Stress," *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, April 2012, 25, 211-215.

¹⁵ *ibid*

“They can call 911 or we have a detachment line because we are a smaller community we get the walk in off the street or a lot of people just call our line ‘cause you know how you have your thing by your phone, you have police, you have fire, people still use the main line.”

“I have had the odd incident where it's the call. If you know the person, that's traumatic to me. If I know someone who's been seriously injured or killed or whatever.”

The emotional impact of handling emergency telephone calls can clearly take a heavy toll. This is exacerbated when DSAs have not been properly prepared for this particular work. In Chapter three, we will show how the lack of training overall for DSAs and in particular with the task of handling emergency telephone calls has resulted in increased symptoms related to secondary traumatic stress.

Other ways RCMP workers are exposed to trauma:

Some employees mentioned dealing with stressful or traumatic incidents, or the possibility of exposure to trauma:

Program Administration, Victim Services Coordinator - “Dealing directly with victims of crime and trauma and some that are abusive or have mental health issues.”

DSA – “Currently working in a Detachment with NO functioning cells. Prisoners are held/processed in common office area.”

DSA – “Unstable people attending the counter to speak to police officer, I work alone the majority of time so have no one else in the office to back me up or assist in an immediate fashion, phone calls from distraught people reporting incidents.”

DSA – “People come to the front counter to make police reports about abuse, I have to take some details to know what type of file to open. Also, people bring in firearms and [ammo] for destruction. Once a person brought in a live grenade that he found while tilling in his garden. When I used to work at Churchill Detachment and we'd get a polar bear call, if the members were out of the office, I would get the shotguns and ammo out of the exhibit locker and meet them at the door. People often call us when in extreme situations, such as watching a person burn to death in a fatal collision.”

Others describe being exposed to challenging and disturbing phone calls, files, photos and audio recordings:

Information Processor/Operational Support Clerk – “Listening to and transcribing 911 calls, traumatic interviews with victims, witnesses, and the accused. Occasional exposure to disturbing and traumatic images.”

Traffic Services Assistant – “I complete disclosure requests for fatal/serious injury motor vehicle collisions and often have to review exhibits, photographs, video, statements and officer's reports which are graphic in nature. As well, I liaise with hospitals and family members when necessary which can be difficult depending on the file.”

Major Crimes Unit Clerk – “Photos, video and audio of homicide crime scenes, statements from family, friends and confessions from charged individuals.”

DSA – “Daily walk-ins from clients in distress over missing loved ones, domestic disputes, death/suicides, family breakups, mental health issues...photos of suicides, death scenes; stories from sexual assault victims, both via statements and in person, some from children; domestic violence clients, some of whom are bleeding, crying, terrified...administering oaths to these victims prior to a statement being taken; members from my detachment responding to high risk calls involving guns, hostage situations, active shooters, mentally disturbed and highly dangerous individuals.”

Automated Criminal Intelligence Information System Support Clerk – “Over the various positions I've held within the RCMP in the past 6 years, I have seen traumatized and frightened witnesses of sexual abuse and violence/homicide give statements, children included; I have seen the police interview murderers including mentally ill murderers (a very scary person when not on meds); I have seen photos of battered/dead victims, and car accident victims; interviews of victims who tell what led up to violent/abusive events sadden me because normal life for them is so dangerous; I've seen interviews of people just like me, who didn't see the underlying symptoms and warning signs of lifestyle/violent events that have come to pass under their noses, in their own homes...I've read police reports that detail sexual abuse and exploitation of adults, children and animals, and have seen limited images/videos (those who need to see those for their jobs have protected me from much of the viewing); I have read such files and seen their conclusion when there has been an inability to charge the offender; I have overheard discussions amongst police officers who are looking at images of child sexual exploitation and are trying to place the age of the victim by the child's body development; I have seen/heard interviews of a mother whose abuse and neglect led to her toddler's death; police officers (co-workers/friends) speak of their own traumatizing experiences; in the course of my days I see the addresses of offenders and places of crime, and know where these places are in my city and my neighbourhood; some of the mugshots I've seen and what I know of these offenders are scary enough to give me the occasional nightmare. I am a more vigilant parent for what I have been exposed to through work.”

Major Crimes Support Clerk – “I am also designated as a Critical Incident Scribe in addition to my job. I can be called out in the middle of the night to a Command Post and be exposed to the incident as it happens, not just after the fact, as I do in my role as Admin Support in Major Crime. In my Admin Support position, often, I will swear a statement that is about to be given by an accused/suspect. As well, I do all transcription for this unit and experience listening to the horror of the victims and witnesses in their own words, as well as the suspects telling in detail how crimes were committed.”

Information Processor – “I work with major crime files. Exposed to child pornography videos, photos and material. Homicide files which includes photos of autopsies, scene photos, written material.”

Stenographer, Typist – “I listen to audio tapes and watch videos of angry, sad, devastated adults and young children. I listen to them yell, scream, cry, throw up, and speak of devastating events happening in their lives. We hear and see almost as much as the regular members do.”

Frequency of exposure experienced by employees within Correctional Services of Canada

Parole Officer – “It is such a negative, toxic and sometimes unfathomable environment to work in.”

Descriptive data illustrates that Correctional Services of Canada employees who are members of the USGE are frequently exposed to traumatic situations and material in their jobs. In response to the question ‘how often are you exposed to traumatic and stressful situations during the course of your jobs?’, 76.4% of respondents (Table 19) said several times a month or more. Over 46% said that this exposure occurred more than several times a week while 17.3% said that they were exposed to traumatic or stressful situations in during the course of their jobs several times a day.

Table 19 – Frequency of exposure to traumatic content within files (CSC)

How often are you exposed to traumatic or stressful situations during the course of your job?		
	Frequency	Percent
I am never exposed to traumatic situations during the course of my job	34	4.6
Less than once a month	93	12.6
Once a month	46	6.3
Several times a month	181	24.6
Once a week	36	4.9
Several times a week	197	26.8
Once a day	21	2.9
Several times a day	128	17.4
Total	736	100.0
Skipped the question	6	
	742	

The high frequency of exposure to traumatic situations experienced by many CSC employees is understandable given that many work in close proximity to offenders inside federal institutions. Indeed, in response to the question “How much of work day takes place within policing penitentiary environments, or in close proximity to offenders” 71.7% of respondents who work for the CSC answered ‘more than six hours’ (Table 20).

Table 20 – Amount of time spent working in penitentiary environments (CSC)

How much of your work day takes place within policing, penitentiary environments, or in close proximity to offenders?		
	Frequency	Percent
I never work in these environments	55	7.4
Less than 1 hour	36	4.9
1-2 hours	18	2.4
2-4 hours	50	6.7
4-6 hours	51	6.9
More than 6 hours	531	71.7
Total	741	100.0
System	1	
	742	

Survey data indicates that these employees spend a great deal of each work days reading written files and/or statements. Institutional and community parole officers, for example, are required to read every detail of an offender’s criminal history and all records related to time spent incarcerated in order to assess and analyze the individual’s rehabilitation. Survey data shows (See table 21 below) that 22.6% of respondents who work for the CSC answered ‘more than 6 hours’ to the question ‘How much of your workday is typically spent working with written files and/or statements’, while 28.2% said that they spend 4-6 hours and another 20.8% said 2-4 hours. This means that 71.8% of respondents spend at least 2 hours of each workday reading written files.

Table 21 – Time spent working with written files (CSC)

How much of your workday is typically spent working with written files and/or statements?		
	Frequency	Percent
I never work with this type of material	42	5.7
Less than 1 hour	74	10.0
1-2 hours	92	12.4
2-4 hours	154	20.8
4-6 hours	209	28.3
More than 6 hours	168	22.7
Total	739	100.0
Skipped the question	3	
	742	

The frequency of exposure to traumatic content within this material is also quite high (See Table 22). One third of survey respondents (29.5%) said that they are exposed to traumatic content ‘several times a day’ while 26.9% said that it was ‘several times a week’. Over 90% of respondents who work for the CSC say that they listen to stories of trauma such as abuse, violence, sexual abuse, fatal accidents or suicide at least once a month. Close to one-third (29.6%) of respondents say that they hear these types of stories several times a day while 28.9% said that it was ‘several times a week’.

Table 22 – Frequency of exposure to traumatic content within files (CSC)

How often are you exposed to traumatic content within this material?		
	Frequency	Percent
I am never exposed to traumatic files, images or videos	93	12.6
Less than once per month	71	9.6
Once per month	28	3.8
Several times a month	101	13.7
Once per week	24	3.3
Several times a week	170	23.1
Once a day	30	4.1
Several times a day	219	29.8
Total	736	100.0
Skipped the question	6	
	742	

One CSC employee who works as an assistant to the Security Intelligence Officer and is responsible for compiling, writing and filing all incident reports for the institution said the following when asked about the frequency of working with written material:

“Five days a week, all day long. Sometimes it's nice and slow and things go easy, but with the regional treatment centre now, it's just constant, just constant.”

When describing their job, they said:

“I have to write all of the incident reports for the institution...I have to write everything for ah, for everything the inmates do. That requires an incident whether its good bad or indifferent. So I have to ah, write every bad evil thing they do in the institution while incarcerated, look after their files.”

The Unique Role of Parole Officers

Parole officers in federal institutions, and in our communities, are not only required to read and analyze every detail of an inmate's case file, they are also obliged to come face to face with offenders after reading accounts of often disturbing crimes and abuses committed by and on these individuals. Fundamentally, 'getting to know' offenders is a key task performed by parole officers and is a central pillar to the overall project of rehabilitation and public safety in Canada. Analysis of offender behaviour and conduct by parole officers sets the basis for decisions surrounding the release, or not, of offenders into the public.

Reading files and then talking to offenders, therefore, makes up the majority of what parole officers do in a day. Indeed, 55.3% of survey respondents who identified their current position as 'parole officer' said that they are exposed to traumatic content within the materials that they reviewed as part of their jobs 'several times a day'. In comparison, 29.5% of all CSC employees who responded to the survey said that exposed to trauma 'several times a day'.

A community Parole Officer summarized their daily routine as, “reading police reports, court reports, criminal profile reports, talking to offenders about what they've done and what's been done to them.”

One institutional Parole Officer explained their daily duties this way:

“We read files on all sorts of different guys, sex offenders and murderers, and you know, child abusers and all sorts of stuff, you kind of, we don't get the media version we get the, um, more graphic version. And then we have to work with that individual, right, so we get to learn all the, read all the police reports, the court reports and agreed statements of facts and what have you and then...It does it weighs on you after a while, mentally it weighs on you.”

Another Parole Officer described their duties and the disturbing content and stories that they hear:

“We have to read police reports, we have to read judge's comments, we have to read victim impact statements, so in those documents I mean depending on the index offence, I mean the bottom line is we work with very violent offenders. I work with sex offenders. I can think of, um, I worked, I did the intake of a convicted pedophile probably six months ago, and he had sexually abused, repeatedly, his four-year-old daughter and it was ah, a difficult, a really difficult case to work on, because the police reports were extremely graphic, the victim impact statement from

the child's mother was extremely graphic and the court documents were extremely graphic describing in great detail exactly how he abused her."

Working within a Correctional Environment

CSC employees responded in varying ways when asked to describe any other ways that they may be exposed to traumatic material, situations or incidents during the course of their jobs. For the most part, however, responses show that exposure to trauma occurs regularly from simply working within the physical space of an institution and in close proximity with offenders inside or outside of a penitentiary. In response to a question about how much of their work day is spent within policing and penitentiary environments, 71.7% of respondents who are CSC employees said more than six hours. One Institutional Parole Officer explained that their office "is literally two feet from the range where inmates live" and that at any time they could "be exposed to any incidents that occur on the range." Given that these employees work in direct physical contact with inmates or in very close proximity, there is a constant sense of alertness and caution.

For example, a Program Officer noted that they experienced trauma from walking among inmates daily in a classroom environment:

"With these inmates, we are routinely discussing their past behaviours, experiences, and attitudes towards wide range of situations. I walk among inmates in hallways and corridors daily with inmates I may or may not know, and have no reference as to their current emotional state or where they currently are within their crime cycle. I am always on alert as to which category of inmates I am approaching, and assessing if another category of inmates might be accidentally in the same area as well, which could be cause for safety concerns. It is not uncommon to step around bodily fluids from a recent incident. Inmates regularly ask simple everyday questions regarding where I live, my lifestyle, my family, act. Therefore, I am always on guard as to what information I provide, and assess how simple information could be garnered for ulterior motives."

A CSC employee who works in the warehouse at a regional psychiatric centre described their exposure to trauma this way:

"Assaults, attempted murders, verbal abuse, and having to be situationally aware of these potential eventualities all day every day. Just last week I got to see an inmate stabbed 6 times in two seconds while I was 3 feet away...This is the sort of stuff that you know is going to happen and is difficult to prepare for, both physically and emotionally."

In response to the same question, a CSC plumber who works inside a correctional facility said that they experienced exposure to trauma by simply doing repairs in rooms or areas after an incident. Another supply officer echoed these feelings saying that they experience trauma from cleaning blood and bodily fluids sometimes supervising inmates and dealing with their anger issues. Clearly, prolonged daily exposure and proximity to actual trauma or the possibility of trauma can have an impact on workers inside CSC facilities.

Some employees even stated that they feel traumatized when helping colleagues who have suffered after dealing with difficult material. One Correctional Program Officer said that they also experience trauma when helping colleagues who need to talk about and process the traumatic material, situation or incident

they have been exposed to or encountered.¹⁶ Another Correctional Program Officer described a similar reality saying that they experienced their colleagues' stress and trauma they themselves have experienced. This is evident by changes in mood, time off as a result, and having to work with no backup or take on their work."

CSC employees in all categories reported similar levels of frequency and types of exposure trauma. Another similar concern was the stress Correctional employees expect to experience given the possibility of being exposed to trauma. They include:

Executive Assistant to Warden – "I expect to read the worse and it's nice, it's a treat when it's not."

Parole Officer – "Working with violent offenders, or unpredictable offenders where we are the decision- makers regarding their freedom, if they are not doing well. We are where they place blame, and therefore, there is a concern for our safety given their history and the potential loss of freedom, as well as repeated exposure to their history, violent criminal history, and then having to find ways to work with them without having this impact our professionalism."

Parole Officer – "Daily, I meet with offenders and discuss their challenges in the community while ensuring public safety. Most of these individuals have traumatic histories. This is often an underlying factor in their offending and talking about it with them regularly takes a toll."

Correctional Program Officer – "Seeing self-inflicted wounds or hearing offenders bash their heads off their cell doors when angry. Offenders exposing themselves or making lewd comments/gestures is jarring, especially to females with a history of their own abuse or their children's abuse."

Behavioural Counsellor – "Secondary trauma stories from inmates relating incidents of violence abuse rape and other traumatic incidents."

Aboriginal Correctional Program Officer – "I work in isolated locations throughout the institution with no security and a staff ratio being 10 inmates to 1 staff."

Aboriginal Correctional Program Officer – "Being isolated in a classroom with 10 inmates and no security presence or other staff, reading [the] morning briefing, having to walk from different locations often because of no stable work location and exposed to movement in the yard.... being exposed to inmates engaging in sexual acts because [there is] no security around, no security within reasonable distance in many aboriginal program areas."

Parole Officer – "It is such a negative, toxic and sometimes unfathomable environment to work in. Unless you are physically working in an institution, then you have no idea what we encounter on a daily basis. We have often said that we could write a book and nobody would believe what we see, read, hear, endure and deal with every day. How do you read some of the most traumatic, horrific and terrifying material (that you would see in a movie) and then come home to your family and NOT bring this home with you?"

¹⁶ Correctional Program Officers work inside federal correctional facilities offering advice and delivering correctional programs such as violence prevention, substance abuse to offenders.

Parole Officer – “Received death threats. I must confront offenders who have a high potential for violence. I cross paths with my clients in my community when I am with my loved ones. I am fearful of clients re-offending.”

Parole Officer – “I constantly work with judicial, court and police material and read about violent and sexual crimes daily. The offenders that I meet must tell me about their crime and their life story. In 2014, I discovered that an offender that I was watching in the community wanted to attack me because he did not like me as I was his Parole Officer. One day I was warned that he was on my heels. The police were going to begin surveillance near my house, but he was found some time before.”

Food Services Worker – “I work in a kitchen so I am at risk of intentional burning by inmates.”

Correctional Program Officer – “When we walk through the halls of the institution, we meet with inmates, sometimes several at the same time, and a conflict situation could break out and we could be witnesses or taken hostage.”

Other departments

Employees from the Justice Canada and Public Prosecutions Service Canada responded to this question in similar ways to workers from other departments. Justice Canada employees hold a variety of administrative positions such as Legal Assistant, Legal Support Administrator, Issues Advisory and Communications Officer. Legal Assistants work with lawyers who are regularly exposed to trauma from the content of their cases. One such worker described being exposed to trauma from their colleagues’ reactions to trauma.

Legal Assistant, Department of Justice – “Seeing colleagues have mental breakdowns involving shouting, sobbing, and being unsure how to help beyond patience and recommending EAP etc.”

Other Department of Justice employees, such as a worker in information holding, experience trauma from files:

Information Holdings – “Depending upon files that need review I could be exposed to many types of material that includes stressful/traumatic evidence for court.”

Public Prosecutions Service Canada employees who work with crown witnesses responded to this question saying that they were regularly exposed to trauma when preparing witnesses and victims to testify in court:

Crown Witness Coordinator – “I work directly with victims of crime who undergo multiple traumas. I provide front line support to victims who's offender is in the court system.”

Crown Witness Coordinator – “I review Police Evidence including witness/victim statements; meeting with victims/witnesses & family members of same. Listening to co-workers speaking with victims/witnesses.”

Crown Witness Coordinator – “Speaking to victims and witnesses of crime on the phone and in person. For every criminal file going through the courts if there is a victim of crime, my position has to speak to that individual and support them through the court process. Often times, this includes hearing their traumatic events that have brought them into the court process, as well

as hearing the effects of the criminal event that they are trying to deal with, which are normally not pleasant dealing with alcoholism, family and children services, financial stress, relationship problems. Prepping the individual for testifying and being there for them when they testify, which entails hearing about the traumatic event. Supporting a victim witness who has had to testify and been cross examined brings out a lot of emotions and trauma for them, and they share them with me.”

A Case Review Officer at the Parole Board of Canada (PBC) is responsible for reviewing and preparing offender files in order for the Parole Board to make well informed decision regarding when an offender will be reviewed for day parole or full parole. Case Review Officers examine and organize offender files which may include a complete history of their life inside and outside of the justice system. These employees never set foot in an institution, but they are exposed to every detail of an offender’s criminal history and their time while incarcerated. Victim impact statements are also reviewed as well as the personal history of the offender.

When asked to describe any other ways that they may be exposed to traumatic material, situations or incidents during the course of their jobs, PBC Case Review Officers repeated how they had been exposed to traumatic material but also described how they have been affected by talking to victims during Parole Board hearings:

“Accompanying victims to parole hearings. Victims can be extremely traumatized themselves or direct all of their anger at me.”

“Mostly through file review, but also sometimes in-person at parole hearings.”

“Accompanying victims to parole hearings. Victims can be extremely traumatized themselves or direct all of their anger at me.”

“I work with victims, they often share information which could be described as traumatic.”

“Working with the Victims Section, we frequently have to read messages from victims and they frequently include details of the crime, how it was committed, etc. We have to listen to audio recordings of hearings and there is frequently traumatic information that is contained in the hearing.”

A PBC Case Review Officer who was interviewed for this study responded to the question about how much of their day was spent reading files said, “you know what, the entire, almost ...is spent reading that, um, from the time I come in I start a file, it takes a while to get through it all, and then as soon as I'm done I move on to the next one so it's really that's the bulk of my work.”

This employee sees upsetting content on a daily basis. When asked about the frequency of exposure to difficult files, they responded “I would probably say once a day there's at least one that really, you know upsets you”.

Chapter 3 –Reasons/causes

Chapters one and two have shown that many public safety workers in Canada experience a high frequency of exposure to traumatic materials, stories and situations. As with police, firefighters and paramedic (also known as the tri-services) who see trauma first hand, public safety employees who read, analyze and discuss trauma as the primary task of their jobs can be negatively impacted.

While workers in the tri-services receive very specific training for handling traumatic emergency situations, many of the employees who participated in this study indicated that they had received little to no training that could have prepared them for the trauma that they are exposed to day in and day out. The data presented below will show how this lack of training, not only for recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress and mental impacts, but to be prepared and resilient when exposed to trauma has, in many cases, created a hazardous work environment. The frequency of exposure to trauma and its impact is clearly not being managed by employers.

The survey and interviews conducted by USGE identified issues that impede employee protections such as workplace culture, and the efficacy of training and preparation before exposure occurs. The training of managers and supervisors on the impacts of the work also appeared as a common concern among interviewees.

While employers, specifically the Correctional Service of Canada and the RCMP, have implemented some mental wellness training for its workers, it has been designed mostly to help public safety workers who are already suffering to recognize their symptoms. Specific training for safely handling high frequency tasks that this report has identified as impacting workers' mental health, such as transcribing victim statements and reading disturbing material, among others, is clearly needed in order to mitigate further negative impacts. Workplace culture, manager/supervisor to worker support and stigma has also been identified in the data as a place for improvement.

Training

Properly training public safety workers for the stress of their jobs has been identified by management in Canadian institutions as an area that should be improved in order to mitigate the impacts of working with traumatizing materials and environments.

In their presentations to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security, the Commissioner of the Correctional Service of Canada and the Deputy Commissioner of the RCMP mentioned training as a key component to equipping employees to be mentally prepared for the challenges of working in corrections and federal policing.¹⁷ Both institutions have used 'mental readiness' training designed to help workers identify when they are suffering psychologically and offer some critical incident management and emergency assistance programs when employees have already experienced a traumatic incident on the job.

Despite these recent efforts by the CSC and RCMP to provide supports for employees, survey data and interview results show a significant deficiency in communication from employers to employees about the

¹⁷ Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security, Number 015, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, Evidence, Tuesday, May 10, 2017, <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/SECU/meeting-15/evidence#Int-8915211>

risks of being exposed to traumatic material, stories and situations, as well as a severe lack of training for working in these environments.

Given the high frequency of exposure to different forms of trauma by public safety employees discussed in Chapter one and the multitude of serious impacts reported in chapter two, the reports of insufficient training discussed below, raise concerns that many of these workers are not properly prepared to safely fulfill their daily tasks.

Overall survey results show (Table 23) that 78% of respondents said that their current employer does not provide specific training for reading and viewing traumatic material while 76.5% said that they had not received training for listening to traumatic stories. Negative responses to the question for whether employers provide training for dealing with traumatic incidents were lower (61%).

In response to a question (Table 24) about whether or not their current employer has ever provided warnings about the risks of being exposed to traumatic material, stories or situations, 44.5% selected 'never' while 28.7% said once or twice. This data shows an overall lack of training and preparedness from employer to employee across all public safety departments represented in this study.

Table 23 – Employer provided training

Does your current employer provide specific training for the following:						
	For reading and viewing traumatic material?		For listening to traumatic stories		For dealing with traumatic incidents?	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	136	11.7	141	12.3	325	29.7
No	906	78.0	881	76.5	668	61
N/A	119	10.2	129	11.2	102	9.3
Total	1161	100	1151	100	1095	100
Skipped the question	81		91		147	
Total	1242		1242		1242	

Table 24 – Employer warnings about risk of exposure to trauma

Has your current employer ever warned you about the risks of being exposed to traumatic material, traumatic stories, or traumatic situations?		
	Frequency	Percent
Once or twice	353	28.7
On numerous occasions	213	17.3
Never	548	44.5
N/A	117	9.5
Total	1231	100
Skipped the question	11	
Total	1242	

RCMP

Respondents who said that they were employed by the RCMP (Table 25), overwhelmingly (79.2%) said that they had received no training for reading and viewing traumatic material. Seventy-six percent indicated that they had received no specific training for listening to traumatic stories while 69.7% said that they had received no training for dealing with traumatic incidents.

Table 25 – Employer provided training (RCMP)

Does your current employer provide specific training for the following:						
	For reading and viewing traumatic material?		For listening to traumatic stories		For dealing with traumatic incidents?	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	33	9.0	34	9.4	59	17.1
No	290	79.2	276	76.0	241	69.7
N/A	43	11.7	53	14.6	46	13.3
Total	366	100	363	100	346	100
Skipped the question	33		36		53	
Total	399		399		399	

In response to the question ‘has your current employer ever warned you about the risks of being exposed to traumatic material, traumatic stories, or traumatic situations?’ (Table 26) 49% said ‘never’, while 27.2% replied ‘once or twice’.

Table 26 – Employer warnings about risk of exposure to trauma (RCMP)

Has your current employer ever warned you about the risks of being exposed to traumatic material, traumatic stories, or traumatic situations?		
	Frequency	Percent
Once or twice	107	27.2
On numerous occasions	44	11.2
Never	193	49.0
N/A	50	12.7
Total	394	100
Skipped the question	5	
total	399	

Only 10.6% of respondents (Table 27) said that when they began their jobs, they knew that they would be exposed to traumatic situations or material and received appropriate training from their employer. The majority of respondents (60.3%) said that they knew that they might be exposed to traumatic situations or material, but received little training, while 27.8% said that they had no idea that they would be exposed to traumatic situations or material and received no training.

Table 27 – Preparation for exposure (RCMP)

When you began your job, how prepared were you to deal with exposure to traumatic situations and/or material?		
	Frequency	Percent
Other	5	1.4
I had no idea that I would be exposed to traumatic situations or material and received no training	96	27.6
I knew that I might be exposed to traumatic situations or material, but received little training	210	60.3
I knew that I would be exposed to traumatic situations or material and I received appropriate training from my employer	37	10.6
Total	348	100
Skipped the question	51	
	399	

Survey data points to an alarming lack of training and preparedness for RCMP employees who frequently work with traumatic material. Interviews and responses to open ended questions validate survey data with disturbing descriptions of RCMP employees undertaking careers within policing environments with little to no training related to traumatic subject matter.

The majority of RCMP Detachment Services Assistants (DSA) interviewed for this study described being trained by other DSAs. They shared stories about the lack of preparation for dealing with traumatic subject matter.

“The training I had, there was just one other clerk here in the office and she did the training, um and she didn't get into, like, you know it was such a long time ago. I know she told me that there was stuff that I would probably be shocked to see and hear, um as time went on and stuff, but she didn't get into the details of like what types of crime, was in the area what the guys were investigating and how to deal with it. no.”

Another DSA mentioned that they had received appropriate training for the general tasks, but had received no training for the subject matter.

“They did a good job of training me at what I'm supposed to do, but they don't say to you in the interview, 'just so you know when you are hired on for this position these are the kind of things that you can expect to happen or to see or to have to process and you might want to take some time to think about whether you can do that or not. Whereas the OCCs¹⁸, or officers when they go through their training they know what to expect, like when I started out 20 years I had no idea. Not a clue.”

Veteran DSAs with decades of experience explained how most of the training is done while on the job.

¹⁸ RCMP Operational Communications Centre workers, are 911 operators.

“The thing is, ah, you have the talk when they come in because, for a DSA you need grade twelve and some type of office admin course. That's all they need, right? And most of it, yes everybody like that can type and do this and that, but everything else you learn on the job.”

One DSA explained how after 20 years the training for the position had remained the same.

“It's stayed the same because we just hired a clerk at XXXX detachment...and I said to her when you went to the interview, did they tell you what kind of things to expect? And she's like, did all the normal, oh yeah I'm going to process files, like your job content description explains, but I'm like what did they explain? Because you're from this community... that these are the things that you're gonna see, hear and be transcribing... did they explain any of that to you? And she's like, well no, so I sat down and had a talk with her and just so you know these are the kinds of things that you can expect.”

In response to a specific question about whether they had received training for dealing with traumatic files:

“No, never, I don't ever recall. We got very little training when I started. I think I may have gone to one course but no, very very little. I remember when I got this job, I had no idea what I would be doing. I remember when they came, I had to do this test and they were asking all these questions and I basically didn't know what I would be confronted with or dealing with on a daily basis and I just learned as I went along basically.”

An RCMP employee who works in the violent crimes division and spends all of their workday examining traumatic case files explained how their training was focused on specific tasks and did not touch on the cumulative impact of repeatedly reading disturbing files.

“The training didn't touch on that at all, actually. I did two sets of training, I was in XXXX for three weeks with the behavioural sciences unit in XXXX and then I did a week in XXXX. Um, basically the training shows you how to deal with the files and how to look for the information and making sure that you have all right information. Ah, what behaviours we are looking for, you know, the important points. Nothing really on the repeated exposure or how you are going to deal with the difficult files. Although, you know, people will say, well you know you are going to see some stuff and it's going to bug you, like a Sergeant in XXXX division, he said ‘I've had to walk away from my desk a couple of times, this is going to happen to you’ you know ‘just try and do what you have to do to deal with it type of thing’, but there was no specific portion of the training that addressed that specific issue.”

In response to an open ended survey question about whether or not workers were prepared for dealing with exposure to traumatic situations or material, many respondents indicated that they knew that exposure was possible, but received little or no training:

Detachment Services Assistant – “I knew that I would be exposed to traumatic situations and material, but no training or advice was ever provided.”

Detachment Services Assistant – “I knew that I would be exposed, it is the nature of the police business. I did not receive training that I can recall.”

Detachment Services Assistant – “I knew I would definitely be exposed to traumatic situations and after a reasonable amount of years experiencing it now I would appreciate some form of session in understanding and processing these experiences.”

One DSA noted that regular members of the RCMP receive debriefings after an incident while public service employees are often overlooked.

“As a DSA I feel we get forgotten about and the debriefs and follow up is for members. Maybe on paper it is noted how this organization values and supports PS staff but sometimes reality and what is on paper are two different things.”

Correctional Service of Canada

Training related survey responses (Table 28) from CSC employees are similar to the RCMP sample with 79.3% saying that they had received no training for reading and viewing traumatic material, and 78.7% indicating that they received no specific training for listening to traumatic stories. A higher number (38.3%) of CSC employees said that they had received specific training for dealing with traumatic incidents. This can be attributed to a regimented work environment for those whose jobs are located within penitentiaries or halfway houses where workers are prepared for the likelihood of traumatic events.

Table 28 - Employer provided training (CSC)

Does your current employer provide specific training for the following:						
	For reading and viewing traumatic material?		For listening to traumatic stories		For dealing with traumatic incidents?	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	94	13.3	97	13.9	253	38.3
No	560	79.3	550	78.7	373	56.4
N/A	52	7.4	52	7.4	35	5.3
Total	706	100	699	100.0	661	100.0
Skipped the question	36		43		81	
Total	742		742		742	

Table 29 shows that 42.1% of CSC respondents have never been warned by their employer about the risks of being exposed to traumatic material, stories or situations. The penitentiary working environment likely led a higher percentage of respondents to say that they had been warned about these risks on numerous occasions (21.7%) or at least once or twice (30.2%). Given the high frequency of exposure to trauma from files and the potentially debilitating consequences, the response rate (42.1%) for having never been warned about the risks of exposure is very high.

Table 29 – Employer warnings about risk of exposure to trauma (CSC)

Has your current employer ever warned you about the risks of being exposed to traumatic material, traumatic stories, or traumatic situations?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Once or twice	222	30.2
On numerous occasions	160	21.7
Never	310	42.1
N/A	44	6.0
Total	736	100.0
Skipped the question	6	
Total	742	

Responses (Table 30) to a question about how prepared CSC workers were to deal with exposure to traumatic situations show that a large majority of respondents (82.5%) knew that they might be exposed to traumatic situations or material, but only 13% said that they had received appropriate training.

Table 30 – Preparation for exposure (CSC)

When you began your job, how prepared were you to deal with exposure to traumatic situations and/or material?		
	Frequency	Percent
Other	14	2.0
I had no idea that I would be exposed to traumatic situations or material and received no training	110	15.5
I knew that I might be exposed to traumatic situations or material, but received little training	493	69.5
I knew that I would be exposed to traumatic situations or material and I received appropriate training from my employer	92	13.0
Total	709	100
Skipped the question	33	
	742	

A Parole Officer who responded to the open ended question about preparedness said that they had been trained for traumatic situations but not for the impact of exposure to traumatic material. This worker also indicated that workplace culture stigmatized employees who are impacted by traumatic material.

“Traumatic situations trained for...not traumatic material, no training for that, no assistance for that... [the] only time it is mentioned is in the job description... vicarious trauma risk. [The] culture at work only supports taking time off work when staff are physically assaulted due to traumatic situations and [they] shame staff who become depressed/over-stressed due to traumatic material/or threats to their safety.”

Another Parole Officer indicated that they knew that they would be exposed but did not received training.

“I knew I would be exposed to traumatic situations or material, but I didn't receive appropriate training from my employer. It's hard to prepare people for that material/situations, and I think

it's expected when you enter this kind of work that you will be exposed to it and should have some abilities to manage it. Where work fails is in following through with time and support to engage in self-care.”

Another Parole Officer described a situation where management will pay lip service to various training initiatives while workers do not see the benefit:

“But in terms of management, I think that they have all of these programs that they like to say.... Oh, we have this and we have that but once they've said, hey we have this... go to it or they've given that...it sort of drops off...and we get buzzwords in government. Unfortunately, my experience has been it [training] is often very self-serving, it's a ticky box, 'look at the good we're doing, we're championing this we're championing that' at the end of the day does it really help me?”

A Security Intelligence Officer summed up how they feel about their training by saying:

“I'm severely affected by what I write and what I read. Terrible. Um and there was training, it's just shut up and do your work. Not from my bosses, but this is basically what it is, you either do it or get out.”

A Parole Officer echoed these sentiments when responding to a question about whether or not they had received training related to the files that they would be exposed to:

“What it is, is 'this is the work that we want you to do and this is the work that we expect you to get done', but it's like, at what cost, like they don't consider the costs of the impact on the staff.”

A Parole Officer contrasted the CSC's professional development with the training workers receive to prepare for the trauma of their job.

“We have yearly professional development, but [to actually] deal with your own mental health and your own vicarious trauma and how to deal effectively, I've had one, we've had one, I've had one day in 23 years.”

When asked what type of training related to trauma exposure they think could be useful for CSC workers to receive, a former Parole Officer who has been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder explained how managers should be given more training to identify the impact of trauma exposure on employees:

“An education on what happens to your brain when you read this crap and what can happen to your body, like signs to look out for. And I know, towards the end, when I went off work one of the managers said to me are you gonna be ok? And I'm like yeah I'm fine, but they could have been.... they're not given any training either on how to deal with people that are.... they might be given some training now, but back then they weren't given training on how to deal with somebody who is not doing...coping so well. So they could have said, well I'm noticing these behaviours in you and this and that. You know it's to have a more candid discussion with your staff if they are noticing something but um, yeah....”

An administrator at a federal penitentiary described how some managers were insensitive and misinformed about mental health in general.

“I have a great manager, a great boss, the rest of the management team at my site, I wouldn't say that about all of them. In fact, a lot of them need a lot more sensitivity training, a lot more training on mental health and how to deal with it and most of the time I'm disgusted by the way they treat their staff that are having these problems. A lot of them will make off sided comments and in front of other staff and they don't have a belief some of them think you just suck it up and maybe they haven't dealt with the same things or haven't read as much and they, yeah, some of them, I just, question how they are in the business that we are in because it's not for the people, it's not for the staff's well-being.”

They continued suggesting that since those who work in Parole Officer management are not exposed to traumatic files and therefore cannot understand how constant exposure to traumatic material can impact the mental health of CSC employees.

“So I don't know, I think, and I know people like that don't read the files...this Manager manages all the Parole Officers that read the files but he doesn't read the files and he doesn't know. So if you don't know what these people are going through and doing.... and then you shrug it off like they are just not strong enough and then you blackball them for certain things and they don't get opportunities or why are you sick again...like it's just...I don't know how to change that culture but I do think there's something that needs to be done and I'm glad Mental Health is becoming more of a forefront.”

Workplace culture

Numerous interviewees indicated that the CSC has a workplace culture that perpetuates mental health impacts as a sign of weakness. Survey respondents were asked a series of questions about workplace culture and the comfort level of employees towards asking for support from managers or supervisors after exposure to traumatic material, stories or incidents.

The responses in Table 31 illustrate how comfortable CSC employees would feel in approaching their managers or supervisors before, during or after viewing or listening to traumatic material, or after being exposed to a traumatic incident.

31.7% and 28.7% of respondents said that they would never feel comfortable asking for support before, during or after viewing traumatic material and stories. Only 18.5% of respondents said that they would never feel comfortable approaching managers or supervisors before, during or after being a traumatic incident.

While RCMP respondents (Table 32) were slightly more inclined to ask for support than CSC employees before, during or after viewing traumatic material and listening to traumatic stories, results between the two departments were fairly similar.

Table 31 – CSC and workplace culture

CSC: Is your workplace culture such that you would feel comfortable asking for support from your manager and/or supervisor:						
	Before, during or after reading and/or viewing traumatic material?		Before, during or after listening to traumatic stories?		Before, during or after being exposed to a traumatic incident?	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Never	224	31.7	201	28.7	123	18.5
Sometimes	257	36.4	274	39.1	249	37.4
Always	200	28.3	195	27.9	267	40.1
N/A	25	3.5	30	4.3	27	4.1
Total	706	100.0	700	100.0	666	100.0
Skipped the question	36		42		76	
Total	742		742		742	

Table 32 – RCMP workplace culture

RCMP: Is your workplace culture such that you would feel comfortable asking for support from your manager and/or supervisor:						
	Before, during or after reading and/or viewing traumatic material?		Before, during or after listening to traumatic stories?		Before, during or after being exposed to a traumatic incident?	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Never	103	27.8	105	28.2	86	24.2
Sometimes	114	30.7	109	29.3	115	32.3
Always	130	35.0	125	33.6	127	35.7
N/A	24	6.5	33	8.9	28	7.9
Total	371		372	100.0	356	100.0
Skipped the question	28		27		43	
Total	399		399		399	

These results show that both RCMP and CSC workers do not feel overly comfortable discussing the impact of their work with management.

One Detachment Services Assistant who has been diagnosed with PTSD due to the cumulative impact of trauma exposure in their job, describes how a supervisor could not understand how a person in an administrative position could suffer from PTSD.

“I was to the point of making a formal complaint against a supervisor because of what they had said to somebody...It was that... ‘I don’t know how a clerk can be diagnosed with PTSD it doesn't make sense to me.’ The sergeant said this. One supervisor said this to another supervisor...how they could not understand, you know, how a clerk could be diagnosed with that...it didn't make sense to him and pretty much thought that it was all BS.”

Conclusion & Recommendations

With operational stress injuries amongst public safety workers gaining more attention in the Canadian media, not to mention an increasing number of federal parliamentarians, most notably via the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety, there is a glimmer of hope that impacted workers will receive the treatment and training that they deserve.

This study has shown that less publicly visible workers in Canada's federal public safety system who work diligently to keep Canadians safe everyday are at significant risk of suffering psychological injuries, and lack the support and training owed to them by the federal employers.

No diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder or other operational stress injuries have been made in this report. Instead, the focus has been to highlight the frequency and type of exposure, the symptoms that arise as a result of this exposure, as well as some of the root causes of this impact. In order to provoke public debate on this issue and to demand action from policy makers USGE is making the following series of recommendations:

RECOMMENDATIONS

The federal government must implement specific measures to recognize the debilitating negative impacts of secondary trauma exposure established in this study on federal Public Safety employees.

- Amend the Government Employees Compensation Act to recognize operational stress injury for public servants regularly exposed to both direct and second-hand trauma – setting a precedent for provincial Workplace Compensation Boards to recognize and provide compensation for secondhand trauma impacts.
- Expand the federal Employee Assistance Program to give public safety employees experiencing second-hand trauma access to specialized trauma counsellors.
- Create custom-designed resiliency and emotional preparedness training for new and existing public safety officers likely to have regular exposure to traumatic material.
- Design and implement de-stigmatization programs and training for new and existing managers in departments where workers are likely to have regular exposure to traumatic material.

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