



COVID-19 and the impact on police services

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With the COVID-19 pandemic, we are increasingly hearing that our protectors are also vulnerable and need protection. Police are exposed to a unique set of challenges in their day-to-day duties that can increase the risk of health concerns from occupational stressors, including operational and organizational stressors.

Providing adequate police service to citizens in Canada is a challenging task. Regardless of the organization, all police officers have to make continuous adjustments in their service delivery to meet the expectations of citizens across the country.

During the past several weeks, all police services have been challenged even more due to COVID-19. Just like many other front-line essential services, police have had to make changes and implement processes to allow front-line staff to provide the services citizens deserve, all the while keeping themselves safe in performing their duties. Police work is very rewarding and noble, yet challenging and stressful at times. The added pressures police officers face due to COVID-19 have certainly added to their level of stress. For that reason, many police service organizations have implemented more support initiatives to ensure that their members are mentally prepared to deliver on their mandate in our current situation and beyond. In this paper, we discuss some of the impacts of COVID-19 on police services and offer some self-care strategies.

INCREASED RISKS AND UNKNOWN THREATS

Police officers are the first responders to deal with the public during high-risk situations. There is always a threat of violence towards them. However, COVID-19 has presented a new threat to them as they, like any other citizen, are at risk of being exposed to this virus. The difference is that police, much like other essential services such as health professionals, fire, paramedics, and others, must respond to calls, which, in most cases, means dealing with unknown situations. COVID-19 now presents an extra element of risk to these responders, and they all recognize a need to be more diligent.

RISK TO FAMILIES

The fact that police officers' daily interactions with the public can put them at risk of exposure to COVID-19, and in turn,

may further expose their loved ones to the virus, also adds stress. In some cases, they may be returning home to family members with compromised immune systems for different reasons such as illness, medication, or pregnancy. COVID-19 now adds to the list of other diseases they are exposed to such as Hepatitis C, tuberculosis, and many other health risks that can harm their family members.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

It is every citizen's duty to respect the rule of social isolation or distancing procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic. The difference is that police are often not able to work within those parameters. Even though police officers are doing much more to protect themselves, there are many instances where regardless of their protective equipment use or other measures, they will be exposed to the virus. When one officer is exposed to the virus, the impact can be significant, as the rest of the team members may need to be tested, and even taken off work to ensure the virus is not further spread. This can be very taxing on organizational resources and on the members themselves, as the remaining officers must maintain the same level of service with fewer people.

MENTAL HEALTH AND OPERATIONAL STRESS INJURIES (OSI)

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented additional occupational stressors to police, for instance due to threats and assaults from the public, as well as exposure to the virus, increasing the risk of operational stress injuries (OSI). Police work does increase the risk of psychological work-related injuries. OSI are persistent psychological difficulties resulting from operational or service-related duties. Some common mental health problems include depression, anxiety disorders, trauma and stressor-related disorders, in particular post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and/or substance use disorders.

In addition to common mental health conditions, risks can also include pain, physical injuries, physical health problems, such as cardiovascular disease, and a range of psychosocial stressors (e.g., financial strains, relationship

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strains), all as part of operational or service-related duties. With the accumulation of traumatic incidents and occupational stressors, vulnerability tends to increase and tolerance tends to go down, in turn increasing risk for burnout and physical and mental health problems.

Other health concerns that police and first responders can face during the COVID-19 pandemic include compassion fatigue and moral suffering. Compassion fatigue is the stress that results from the traumatized individual rather than the trauma itself. It often involves excessive preoccupation with the suffering of trauma survivors. The pain can be felt cognitively, physically, psychologically, and emotionally. Providing care to trauma victims, being repeatedly exposed to their traumatic experiences, and offering empathetic support to trauma survivors can increase stress levels, leading to negative emotional reactions and, in turn, compassion fatigue.

With COVID-19, police officers are seeing, close up and often, the devastation families can experience when loved ones are separated and/or cannot reunite. They are also having to address increasing calls related to domestic violence or abuse to children as a result of social isolation regulations. Finally, they are faced with enforcing rules on business closures and witnessing the pain resulting from the financial devastation.

Moral injury can also have long-lasting emotional and psychological impact. When we believe we did not do enough or did not do the right thing, this can lead to moral distress as a result of internal tension. Moral injury is a disruption in our trust. A psychological disequilibrium can take place within the self, where actions of self or others are not in harmony with one's moral values, ethical values, core beliefs, and expectations. Certainly, protecting the public during the COVID-19 pandemic can increase moral distress as a result of the many inherent existing challenges.

HIGH NOTES

Even though COVID-19 has increased the level of stress for police, most are appreciative of the community support for them and their efforts, according to conversations with many officers during the past few weeks. This is significant and very positive for them and their personal health. Also, many feel fortunate to have a continuing job during these tough economic times and, more importantly, a job that provides safety to citizens and presents them with many opportunities to make a difference. After all, COVID-19 is impacting every citizen and, during such times, it is important to maintain a positive mindset to get through it. The key may be to monitor the impacts in the future and to ensure all officers have the continuing supports they require.

BUILDING AN INDIVIDUALIZED APPROACH TO SELF-CARE AND RESILIENCY

Continuous efforts are being made to reduce stigma (personal, self, and workplace) and to address common health conditions as part of the prevention (primary, secondary, and tertiary) continuum of care in order to reduce risk factors, build on protective factors and resiliency, and work on optimizing interventions in the workplace.

We want police officers and first responders to know they are not alone in meeting their mental health needs when they help others—they can reach out for help if and when needed, from peer support to consultation with a mental health professional.

Some proactive mental health strategies for officers:

- Normalize all your emotions and thoughts. Do not fear them, as they are educational and provide cues to take action.
- Practice grounding. Distinguish current from potential worries, and focus on what you can control. This will help you to remain centered on the moment and the present time, “the here and now.” Use your senses, what you touch, see, hear, sense, and smell, to help you. For example, feel the air touching your face. The more grounded you are, the more connected you are to reality. In turn, you will feel more in control and make healthier and more balanced decisions.
- Reframe negative thoughts and worries by putting them into perspective, balancing your thoughts in addition to identifying your strengths, resources, and support to help problem-solve, make healthy decisions and move forward.
- Practice psychological flexibility. Re-evaluate and revise your thoughts, expectations, and goals to ensure they match the current reality, and you can achieve a realistic outcome. The more flexible you are the more you will feel resilient.
- Health is health, whether mental or physical. Work towards a lifestyle that includes a balanced diet, physical activity, proper sleep habits, seeking quality social support and setting meaningful activities.
- Identify positives every day and practice gratitude. Build compassion satisfaction by focusing on the positives of your work, being proud of your accomplishments regardless of the outcome, and focusing on a sense of satisfaction from helping others while also working on setting boundaries. Emotional boundaries tend to change over time and help maintain compassion and empathy without overly taking on someone else's pain or tragedy. You also need to focus on your own needs, feelings, and rights while you are taking care of others. It will help you to do work more efficiently and prevent the risk for burnout.
- Practice self-compassion by being kind to yourself, not judging yourself, being mindful of your thoughts and feelings, and putting them into perspective; acknowledge and accept that you are a human being and accept the imperfections that comes with being human.
- Avoid substance misuse.
- Focus on your breathing and slow down your breathing rate.
- Do not hesitate to seek professional help if you are experiencing increasing psychological distress; difficulty initiating tasks or taking care of responsibilities; chronic low mood, or excessive anxiety that is increasingly difficult to manage; lacking pleasure in activities; difficulties with sleep and/or concentration; increasing distressing memories of an incident or chronically reliving a traumatic event or other symptoms that cause you concern.

Finally, we would like to thank you for your service and for all that you do.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest. The editor and co-author, K. Kamkar, serves as a Section Editor for the Journal of CSWB.

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