

Examining Mental Health Knowledge, Stigma, and Service Use Intentions Among Public Safety Personnel

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Public Safety Personnel (PSP) experience a heightened risk of developing mental disorders caused by exposure to potentially psychologically traumatic events (PPTs). Current estimates suggest almost 45% of PSP screen positive for one or more mental disorders, whereas the general population is closer to 10%.

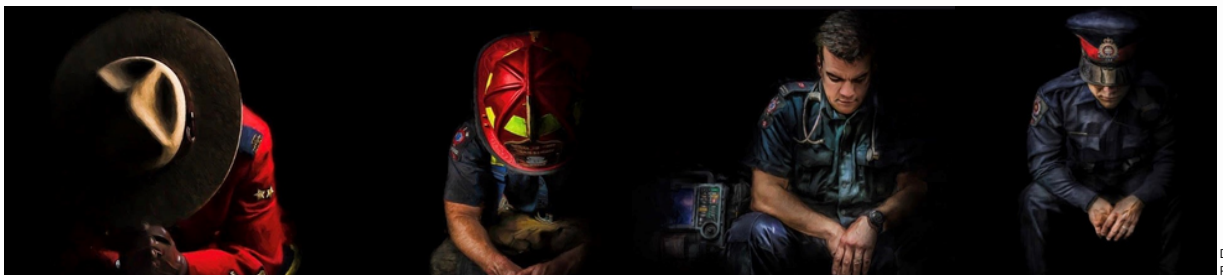
Most mental health education programs, including resilience training programs, are delivered with the hope that improving participants' mental health knowledge will reduce stigma in the workplace, increase their willingness to seek support, and lower their likelihood of developing mental disorders or lessen the burden of mental disorders. The published peer-reviewed evaluation results are limited, but suggest that such programs appear to provide small to moderate positive impacts on the mental health of PSP, including decreased stigma, and increased help-seeking behaviors. Further research is needed, especially research assessing changes over time. More research results may help researchers, clinicians, and PSP leaders identify appropriate targets for interventions, and help to inform best practices to support the mental health of PSP.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

The current study was designed to assess the relationship between mental health knowledge, stigma, and mental health service use intentions among a sample of PSP and compare trends to prevalence of mental disorders across PSP categories. The number of positive screenings for mental health disorders among PSP were collected in a previous study (Carleton et al., 2018a).

Researchers expected that:

- Higher mental health knowledge and lower stigma would be associated with higher intentions to use services for all participants across all PSP sectors.
- Higher mental health knowledge and lower stigma would be associated with fewer positive screenings for mental health disorders among all PSP.
 - Firefighters would report the fewest positive screens for mental disorders (Carleton et al., 2018a), as well as reporting the highest mental health knowledge, lowest stigma, and highest willingness to seek mental health services.
 - Correctional workers would report the most positive screens for mental disorders (Carleton et al., 2018a), as well as reporting the lowest mental health knowledge, highest stigma, and lowest service use intentions.



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WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

A survey was distributed to currently employed PSP across Canada and the results of 4,108 individuals were evaluated. Each participant was assigned to one of six categories for analyses: public safety communicators (e.g., 911 call center operators/dispatchers), correctional workers, federal police (i.e., Royal Canadian Mounted Police), firefighters, municipal/ provincial police, and paramedics. The survey used various measurement tools to assess participant perceptions about mental health, levels of recognition and familiarity with various mental health conditions, prevalence of workplace mental health stigma, and willingness to seek professional mental health services.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

- Higher levels of mental health knowledge were associated with greater willingness to seek professional mental health services and lower levels of stigma among correctional workers and public safety communicators; however, paramedics reported high levels of mental health knowledge and low stigma, but were least likely to seek help if needed.
- For firefighters, RCMP, and municipal/ provincial police, lower levels of mental health knowledge were associated with lower willingness to seek professional mental health services and higher levels of stigma.
- There were differences between each PSP group and their levels of mental health knowledge, levels of stigma, and willingness to access mental health services.

- Contrary to expectations, firefighters reported the lowest mental health knowledge, the lowest willingness to seek mental health services, and the highest stigma, despite reporting the fewest positive screenings for mental disorders.
- Unexpectedly, correctional workers reported the highest mental health knowledge, lowest stigma, and highest willingness to seek mental health services, despite reporting the most positive screenings for mental disorders.

WHAT DOES THIS RESEARCH MEAN?

- Sector-specific psychoeducational programs may be more effective for meeting the unique needs of various PSP sectors.
- Future researchers should seek to identify factors that will encourage and support all PSP in accessing professional mental health services.
- Regularly delivering evidence-informed mental health education programming to PSP may help to maximize the impact of psychoeducation programs designed to reduce mental health stigma, encourage service use, and promote wellbeing.
- There may be many ways that risk factors and protective factors interact with PSP experiences, creating very different mental health outcomes; as such, tailoring several different evidence-informed support options specifically for PSP may be particularly helpful for supporting their mental health.



CITATION

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