

Public Safety Salute: A research and knowledge mobilization effort to support the mental health and wellbeing needs of Canadian Public Safety Personnel



CIPSRT Together We are Stronger Conference

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McMaster University is located on the traditional territories of the Mississauga and Haudenosaunee nations, and within the lands protected by the “Dish with One Spoon” wampum agreement. For many thousands of years, the first people sought to walk gently on this land, offering their assistance to the first European travellers and

sharing their knowledge for survival in what was at times a harsh climate. We seek a new relationship with the original peoples of this land, one based in honour and deep respect. May we be guided by love and right action as we transform our personal and institutional relationships with our indigenous friends and neighbours.



Our Team



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HEALTH SCIENCES



Canadian Public Safety Personnel:

Paying the Price for Safety

Funded by the Canadian Institute of Health Research and by a donation from Homewood Health to Homewood Research Institute

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Public Safety Personnel faced harsh and unique challenges while serving their communities, which continue to impact their mental health and well-being. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, McMaster University has been conducting research with Canadian PSP to better understand and support these essential workers



If I felt a patient needed the treatment, I still did it and then dealt with the consequences.

- Paramedic

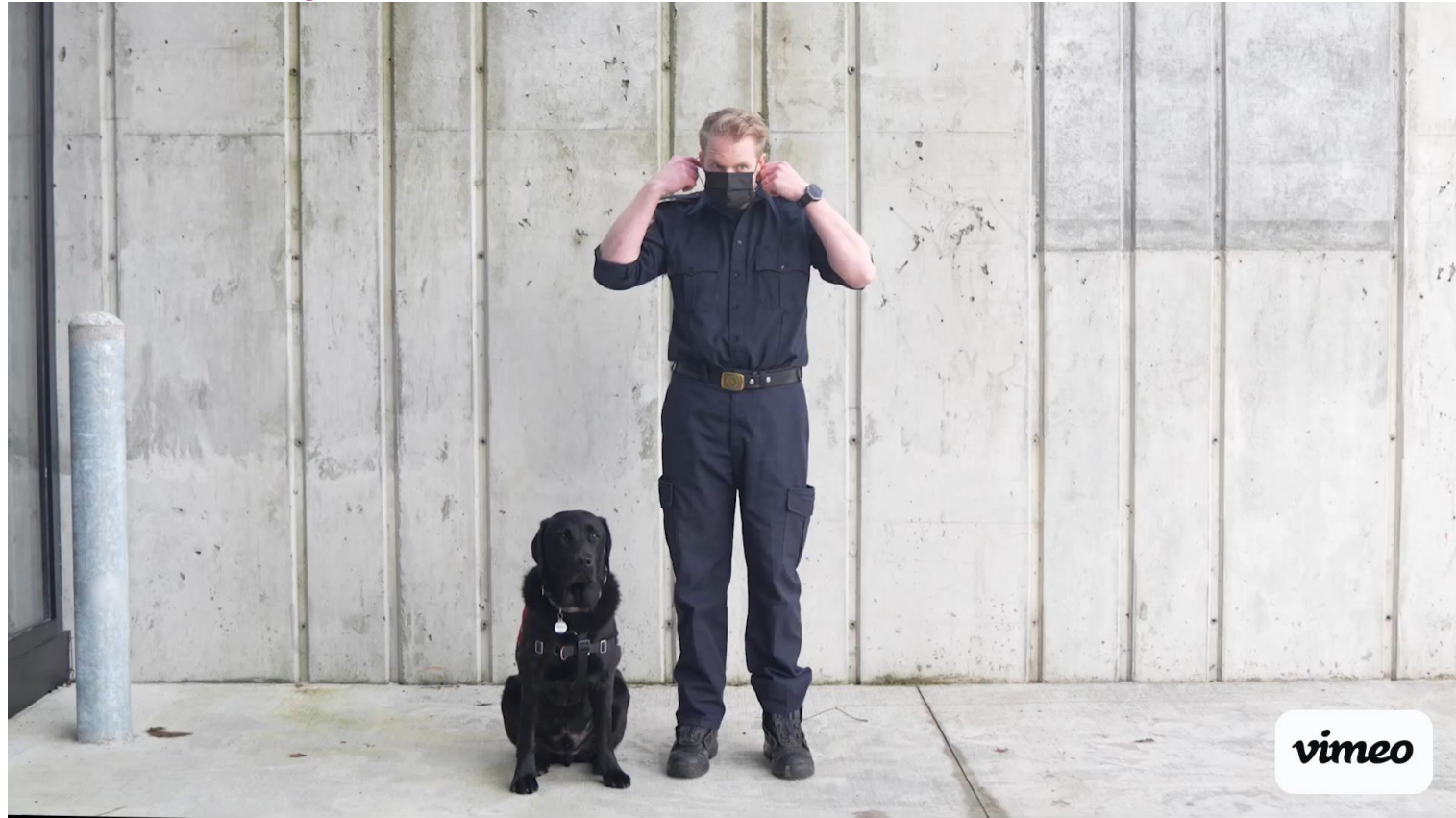
April 19, 2024

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Overview of PSP

- Due to the nature of their occupation, PSP may be involved in responding to natural disasters, fires, criminal activity, physical assaults, sudden violent deaths (Carleton et al., 2019; Stogner et al., 2020)
- PSP are at increased risk of experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and alcohol use, which may consequently lead to mental health diagnoses (Carleton et al., 2018; Carleton et al., 2019)
- The COVID-19 pandemic presented complicated and increased challenges to PSP: enforcing stay-at-home mandates, encouraging/following social distancing, adapting to ever-changing policies, negotiating with resisting citizens (Stogner et al., 2020) – all while dealing with fear of contagion, transmission to loved ones, isolation (McCall et al., 2020; Stogner et al., 2020)
- Reports during the pandemic have indicated heightened symptoms of burnout, emotional exhaustion, PTSD, anxiety, depression (McCall et al., 2020; Petrie et al., 2022)

Video: Brandon, firefighter in Vancouver, B.C.



PUBLIC SAFETY SALUTE

<https://www.thetraumaandrecoverylab.com/payingthepriceforsafety>

- Research and understanding
- Communication to stakeholders, including government briefings with CIPSRT
- Public awareness and cultural sensitivity
- Symposium
- Key recommendations to organizations



Research Project

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify the types of PMIEs described by select PSP during the COVID-19 pandemic and their associated psychological and functional outcomes.

Professions Represented



Dispatchers



Border Patrol



Correctional Officers



Firefighters



Paramedics



Police

Methodology

PSP from across Canada were invited to participate in a survey and/or virtual semi-structured interviews from June to December 2021.

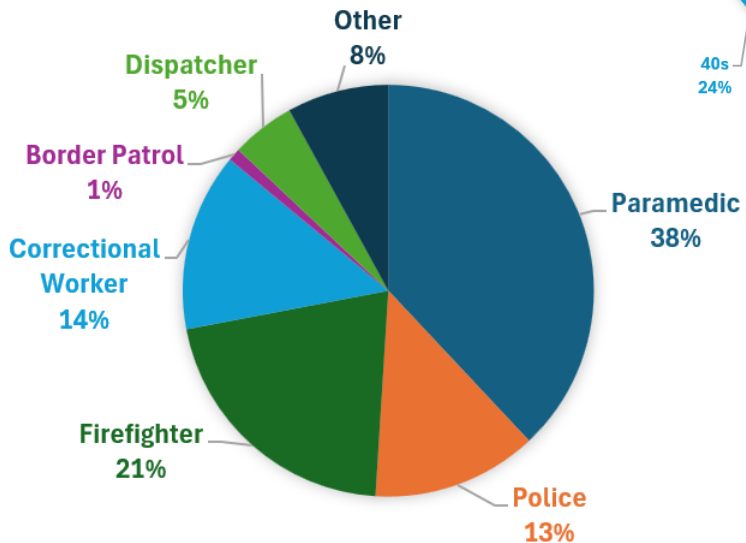


Qualitative data was analyzed through an inductive thematic approach.

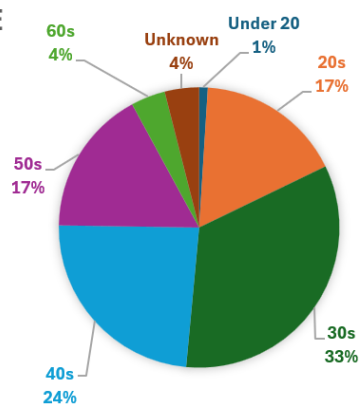
Survey Demographics

Sample: N=668

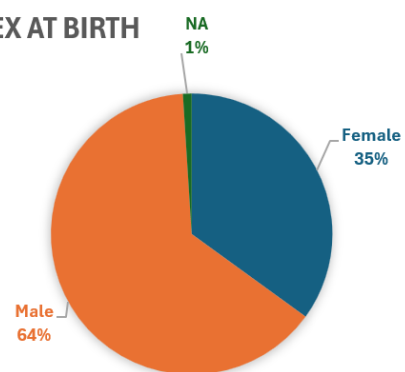
PROFESSION



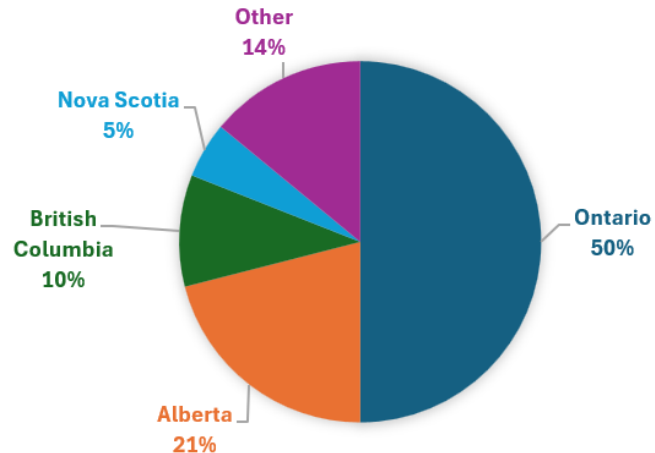
AGE



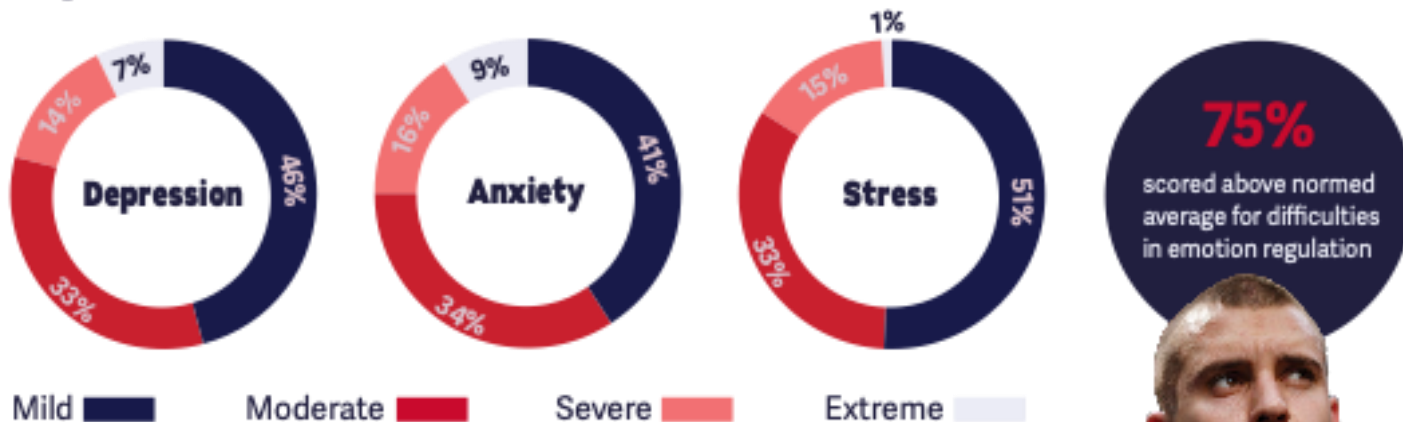
SEX AT BIRTH



PROVINCE



Impacts on PSP mental health



38.62% of PSP met cut-off for probable PTSD

18.6% of PSP report low levels of organizational support

When we came back out of the back of the truck after gowning up, the patient was lying face down on his steps and he had had a cardiac arrest in the time it took for us to finish putting on this PPE. So, then we went from take a call for someone who was still alive to someone who has died in the time for us to put on PPE.

- Paramedic



**Moral injury: The signature
wound
of service.**

**Blessure Morale : La blessure
qui témoigne du service**



Video: Reece, former paramedic in Manitoba

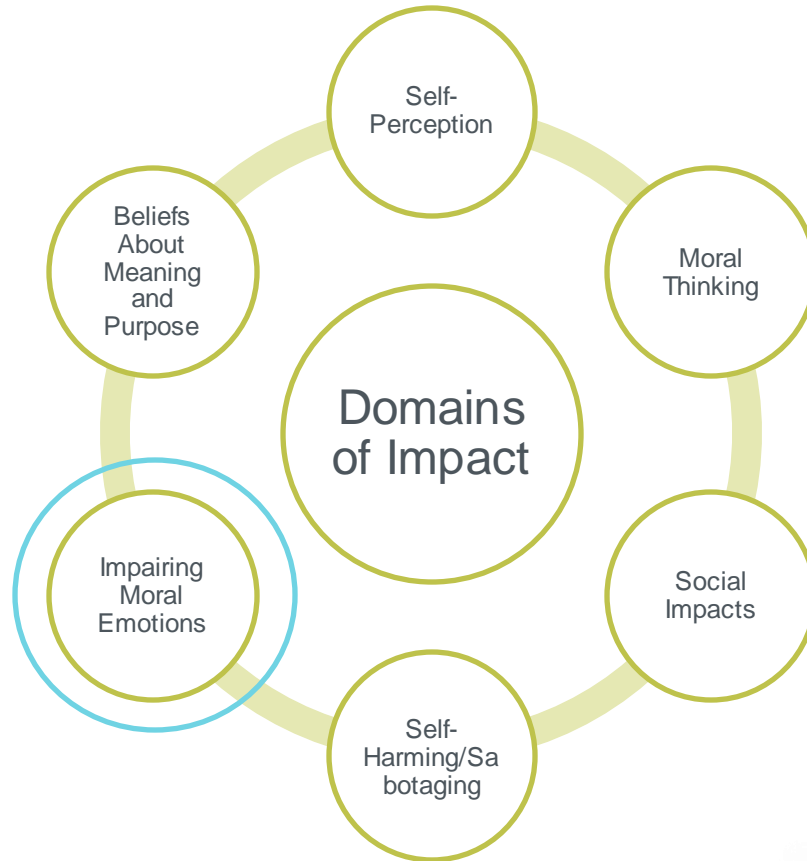


“Violations of deeply held moral beliefs by oneself or trusted individuals” (Jinkerson, 2016)

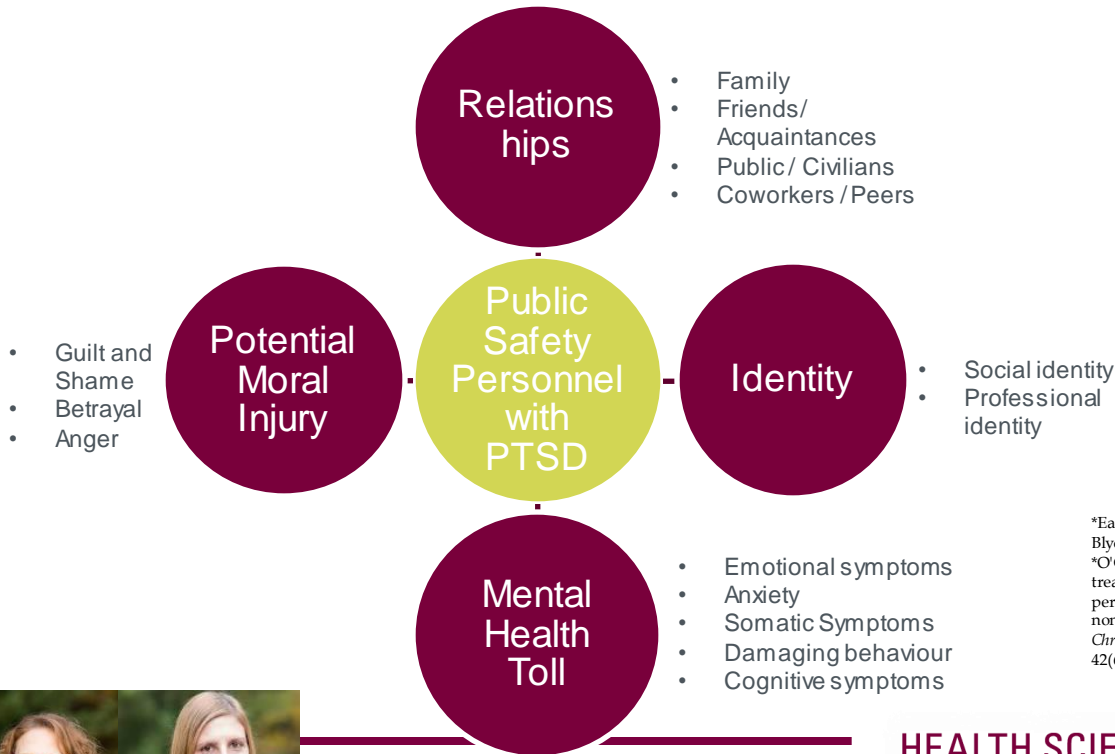


Moral Injury is the outcome of exposure to potentially morally injurious event(s) (PMIEs):

- Actions or inactions which transgress moral values
- Betrayal by another individual or organization



Major Themes



*Easterbrook, B., Brown, A., Millman, H., Van Blyderveen, S., Lanius, R., *McKinnon, M.C., *O'Connor, C. (2022). The mental health experience of treatment-seeking military members and public safety personnel: A qualitative investigation of trauma and non-trauma related concerns. *Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention in Canada*, 01 Jun 2022, 42(6):252-260 DOI: [10.24095/hpcdp.42.6.03](https://doi.org/10.24095/hpcdp.42.6.03)



Moral Injury Assessment - PSP

Theme 1: Job-related Perpetrations

- Morally distressing decisions made on the job (protecting self over other, sacrificing a life to save another, blaming co-workers)

Theme 2: Institutional Failings

- Perceived moral violations by governing organization (insufficient training, lack of support and recognition)

Theme 3: Emotional Impact

- Emotional sequelae resulting from job-related moral violations (anger, shame, guilt)

Roth, S.L., Andrews, K., Protopopescu, A., Lloyd, C., O'Connor, C., Losier, B. J., Lanius, R. A., & McKinnon, M. C. (2022). Development and preliminary evaluation of the Moral Injury Assessment for Public Safety Personnel. *Traumatology*.



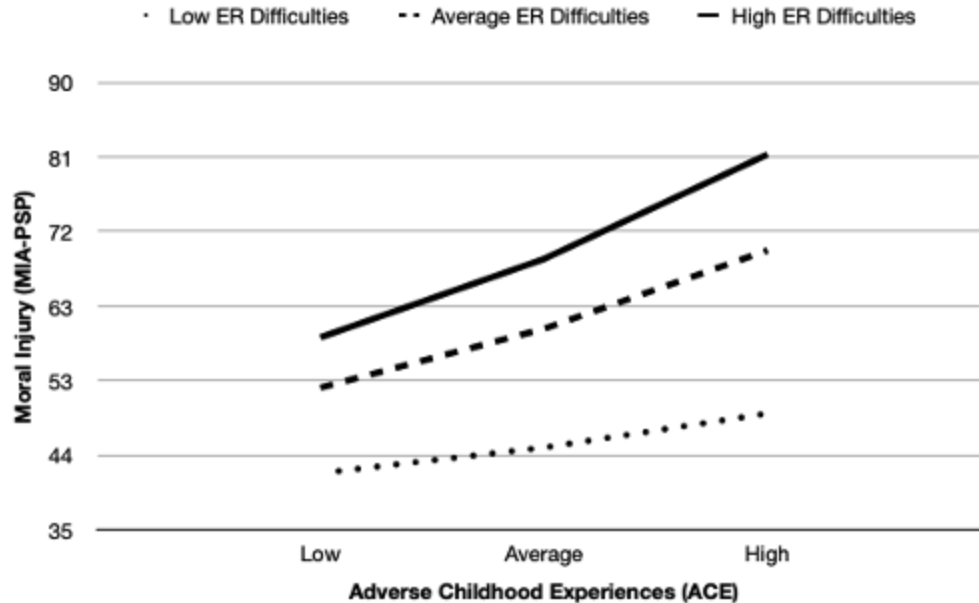


Figure 1. Moderating effect of emotion regulation on the relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Moral Injury Symptoms in adulthood. First Responders with fewer emotion regulation difficulties were more protected against the deleterious impact of ACEs on Moral Injury symptoms than those with higher levels of emotion regulation difficulties.

Moral and Ethical Values of PSP

"Integrity, honesty, and obviously, patient care, good - honesty with your patients as well and with your crew" (Paramedic Firefighter; 45PSP)

"...everybody has the right to be themselves authentically..." (Paramedic; 04PSP)

"I need every coworker no matter what it is – COVID, fire – they have my back..." (Firefighter; 49PSP)

"...responsible, intelligent, caring, compassionate people..." (Police Officer; 63PSP)

"...care about everybody..." (Paramedic; 54PSP)

"...try not to harm people..." (Paramedic; 56PSP)



Thematic Framework

Person

Enforcing COVID mandates that conflict with beliefs

Failure to prevent harm by following COVID Protocols

Team

Inappropriate and unprofessional conduct

Tension related to masking and vaccine mandates

**Organization/
System**

System inadequacies

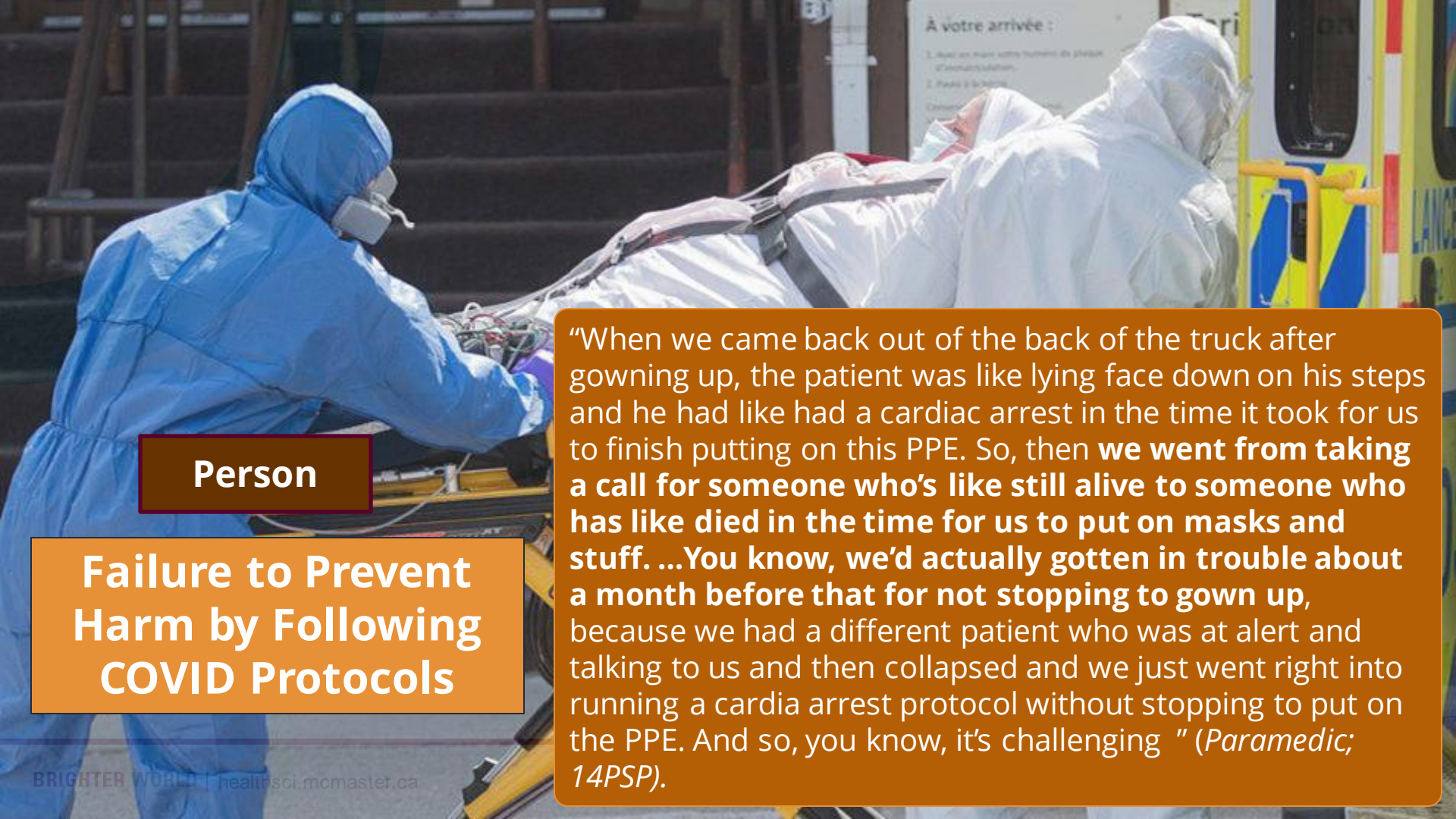
Not valuing personal safety and well-being

Being reprimanded for doing the right thing

Public

Backlash against masking and vaccine mandates

Disregarding the wellbeing of PSP and others



Person

Failure to Prevent Harm by Following COVID Protocols

“When we came back out of the back of the truck after gowning up, the patient was like lying face down on his steps and he had like had a cardiac arrest in the time it took for us to finish putting on this PPE. So, then **we went from taking a call for someone who’s like still alive to someone who has like died in the time for us to put on masks and stuff. ...You know, we’d actually gotten in trouble about a month before that for not stopping to gown up,** because we had a different patient who was at alert and talking to us and then collapsed and we just went right into running a cardiac arrest protocol without stopping to put on the PPE. And so, you know, it’s challenging ” (*Paramedic; 14PSP*).

Team

Tension Related to Masking and Vaccine Mandates

So it wasn't – the anger didn't come from I felt they were putting us at risk I just felt, like you said, the fundamental values....**it totally changes the way I think about people.** ...I don't care about your agenda...it's really not that hard and **just wear the bloody mask.** ...it really kind of **offended my fundamental values.** We're doing this so that we can get back to normal faster, so whether you like it or not **do the right thing..."** (*Firefighter, 32PSP*).



Organization/System

Being Reprimanded for Doing the Right Thing

"...but if I felt a patient needed the treatment I still did it and then I dealt with the consequences. So, you know, I think I got one letter on my file for 18 months for a contradiction that I actually did and it was for an overdose patient. So I bagged that patient, I didn't care, so, yeah"
(Paramedic; 29PSP).





Public

Disregarding the Wellbeing of PSP and Others

“So there’s a lot of **lying from patients**. And I don’t know why that was when they’re fearful to tell paramedics that they had COVID or they were diagnosed with COVID. So that upset me because that was **the very first thing we asked and then for it not to be true gets you upset**”
(Paramedic; 09PSP).

Public

Backlash Against Masking and Vaccine Mandates

“Oh, like all the people who refuse to do any type of vaccination or do any type of – do anything to help people. Even **just wearing a simple mask, you know, we’re sitting here doing a lot of work and working ourselves to exhaustion and they just don’t give a damn.** That’s really – that makes me upset. You know, before I thought that maybe people would actually help each other; and then, I mean, that’s just been proven that no, they really don’t.” *(Paramedic; 56PSP)*



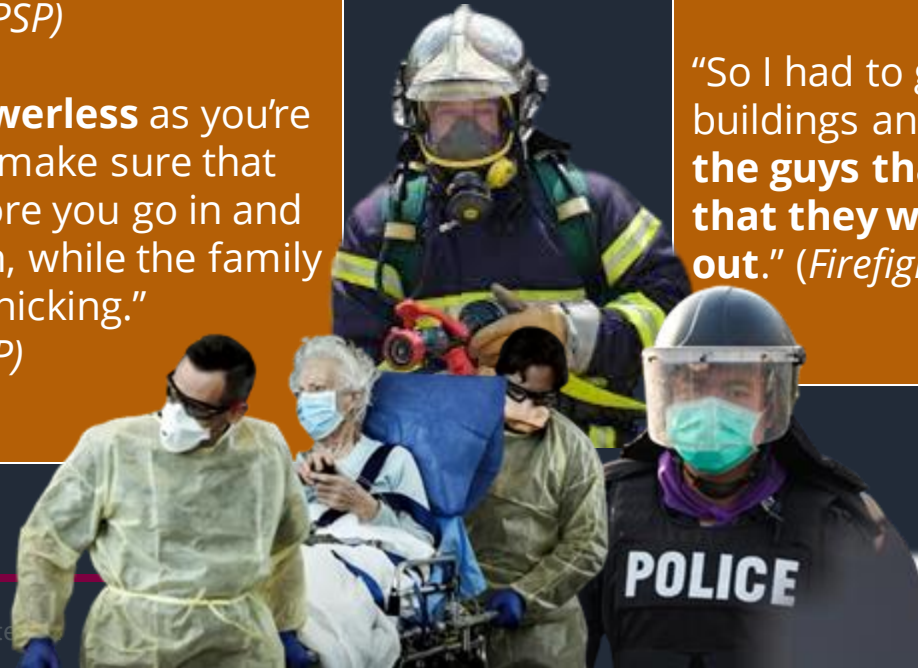
Outcomes

"I would say **anger** and **frustration**, and then right at the very end, it all just translated into a profound **disappointment.**"
(Police Officer; 63PSP)

"And you feel **powerless** as you're outside trying to make sure that you are safe before you go in and touch this person, while the family is legitimately panicking."
(Paramedic; 46PSP)

"I feel like it's taking a lot of energy out of me ... it's very **heavy on my shoulder.**"
(Paramedic; 30PSP)

"So I had to go in burning buildings and **not trusting the guys that I went in with that they would pull me out.**" (Firefighter; 49PSP)



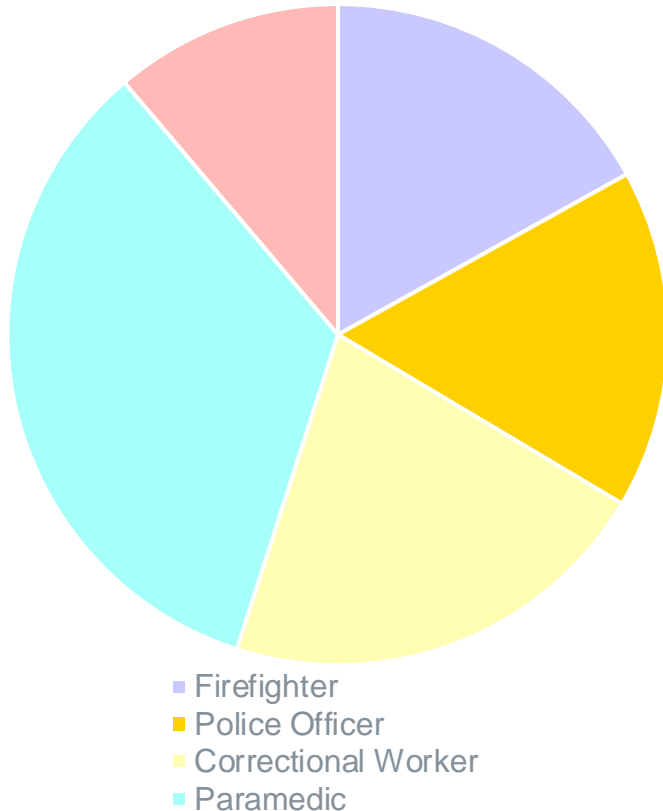
Key Findings

PSP report a range of potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs) endured during COVID-19

PMIEs are experienced by PSP at multiple levels (person, team, organizational/system, public) that intersect and overlap

Majority of PMIEs originate from the organization and system, which are experienced as deep betrayals resulting in anger and frustration

Occupation



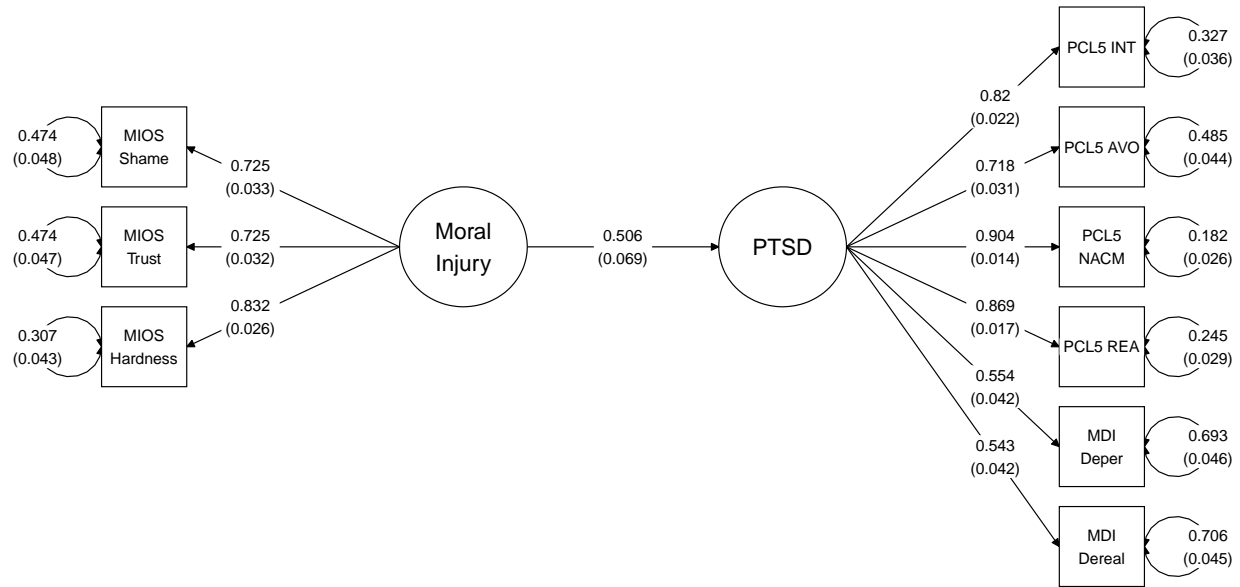
Sample Characteristics

- N = 314
- Average age = 41.94 ($SD = 11.10$)
- 70% Male
- 70% European
- 46% Ontario
- Averaged years worked = 14.22 ($SD = 9.90$)

The **model** accounted for **83.7%** of the variance in **PTSD** ($r^2 = 0.837$ $p < .0001$).

Moral injury strongly and significantly predicted PTSD ($\beta = 0.506$, $p < 0.0001$) after controlling for age, sex, depression, anxiety, stress and childhood adversity.

There were significant effects of **anxiety** ($\beta = 0.234$, $p = 0.0001$) and **stress** ($\beta = 0.218$, $p = 0.002$).



Shame-Related

Self-compassion ($B = -0.376, p = .014$), **spiritual well-being** ($B = -0.265, p < .001$), **social support** ($B = -0.141, p < .001$) associated with lower moral injury

Trust-Violation-Related

Spiritual well-being ($B = -0.410, p < .001$), **organizational support** ($B = -0.250, p < .001$) associated with lower moral injury, while **alcohol use** ($B = 0.13$) was associated with increased moral injury

- PSP may be **exposed to situations in which their moral values are violated** (i.e., PMIEs), heightening risk for moral injury
- **Study 1** demonstrates a **significant and strong association between moral injury and PTSD** (including dissociation) among PSP, adding to our understanding of moral injury among PSP
- **Study 2** indicates that **spiritual well-being, organizational support and self-compassion** may be helpful in reducing moral injury among PSP

Overall Summary

Organizational challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic

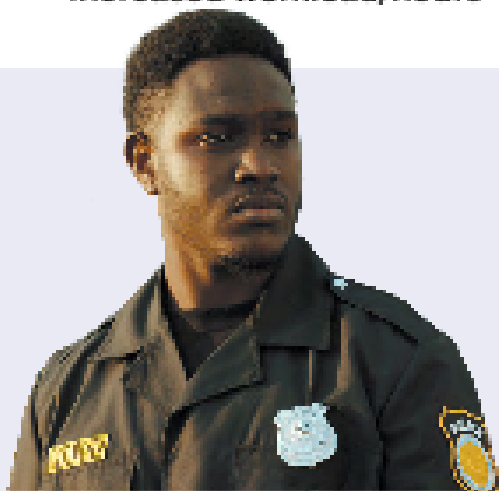
Organizational Stressors (based on 60 interviews)

- Communication breakdown
- Disagreement with new policies
- Low perception of leadership support
- Increased workload/hours



Main reasons for wanting to leave:

- Mental health impacts
- Poor working conditions
- Feeling dehumanized by the organization
- Pushback from the public



Public Safety Services at Risk

1 in 2

PSP of study participants said there is a 50% or higher chance of their **leaving the organization.**

44%

of PSP study participants said there is a 50% or higher chance of their **leaving their profession altogether.**

PSP Leaving

“Policing is no longer worth it. It becomes more stressful by the day. There are few real supports. It’s contributed many negative aspects to my life, affected my mental and physical health, and no longer provides me any form of satisfaction.” – Police Officer

“Too much expected with little to no recognition. Horrible working conditions – short staffed, hospital offloads, no meal breaks because we are too busy. We do NOT have the resources to respond to low priority calls yet we still get sent to all of them despite higher priority calls taking place elsewhere in our coverage area.” – Paramedic

“Policing is an increasingly stressful occupation where people hate you more and more everyday.” – Police Officer

“There is no culture around the important of psychological wellbeing. Some management still believes in ‘suck it up and do as I say’ type of leadership.” – Paramedic

“Lack of pay, unable to get vacation time approved, feeling unwanted in the company. Like, the paramedics on the front lines are numbers and pawns – not people.” - Paramedic

Organizational Themes in Interview

- *Support by leadership* addresses the way leadership interacts with their staff and demonstrates support for their employees. PSP expressed feeling unsupported and misunderstood by their leaders, as data suggests the pandemic has furthered a perceived gap between PSP and upper management.
- *Communication strategies* describes the way communication flows between frontline staff and their leaders, especially in times of crisis. PSP shared that two-way communication was often absent during the pandemic, and that the transmitted information generally lacked clarity and transparency.
- *Team cohesiveness* refers to the type of relationships PSP have with their colleagues, and more specifically, whether they feel they work in a cohesive and supportive group environment. PSP explained how important it is for them to feel that their colleagues have their back, as strong team relations helped them face the many challenges brought on by the pandemic.
- *Formal Organizational Support* addresses the types of support that are made available to PSP to help them cope with the stress of their profession. PSP mentioned they feel there is a lack of adequate psychological supports in their organization and expressed their need for training sessions to better support their mental health.

PSP Recommendations

Leadership



Reduce barriers between PSP and leadership by intentionally communicating to staff that they are seen and valued through actions, not just words.



Include PSP in decision making and genuinely seek their input and feedback on proposed changes.



Demonstrate recognition of the adverse impacts of PSP service on mental health, by being proactive and making mental health a clear priority.



Acknowledge, validate, and respond to PSP's concerns for physical safety.



Demonstrate recognition that PSP are more than the job – they have families and responsibilities outside of the organization.



Communicate trust and confidence in staff by taking on a supportive role and empowering their autonomy.

PSP Recommendations

Communication



PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PSP TO VOICE THEIR CONCERNS AND HAVE DISCUSSIONS REGARDING NEW POLICIES AND PROTOCOLS.



ENSURE THAT DIRECTIVES ARE EXPLAINED USING RATIONALE, AND THAT CLEAR GUIDANCE IS PROVIDED ON HOW TO PUT THESE POLICIES INTO PRACTICE.



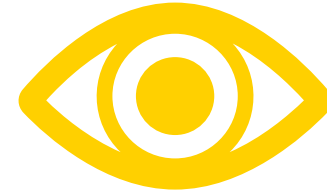
ESTABLISH A CENTRALIZED LOCATION FOR STAFF TO ACCESS THE MOST IMPORTANT UPDATES.

PSP Recommendations

Team



Encourage a culture of collective problem-solving to foster productivity, cohesion, and solidarity within your staff.



Prioritize psychological safety in the workplace by encouraging social connectivity and a culture of camaraderie.

PSP Recommendations

Formal Organizational Support



Ensure mental health supports and resources are readily available, up to date and easy to access for staff.



Provide specific and tailored mental health training in a digestible format, as part of the onboarding and hiring process. In addition, provide relevant retroactive training for current staff and leadership.



We stand
together!

