

## Article

# Parole work in Canada: The realities of supervising “sex offenders”

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## Abstract

Analyzing interview data ( $n = 150$ ) collected from Canadian federal parole officers (POs), we unpack potentially psychologically traumatic events (PPTs) concerning experiences supervising and supporting re-entry of people convicted of sex-related crimes (PCSCs). We find heterogeneity in the broad range of sex-crime behavior and potential psychological trauma that POs negotiate regarding their own gender and familial circumstances. We further observe how working with sex crimes contributes to the experience of operational stress as “moral injury.” Cathartic utility is found in collegial debriefing that supports POs experiencing distress on the job. Given the precarity of personal and professional boundaries in parole work, and the variances of both criminal behavior and how POs respond to it, we suggest the need for further research while outlining our theoretical and empirical contributions.

## Keywords

collegial debriefing, emotional labor, prison and community parole work, cumulative impact, sex crimes, catharsis

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## Introduction

In Canada, parole is federally administered by Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) when a sentence of imprisonment is two years or greater, and for sentences of less than two years, probation is administered by provincial or territorial correctional services (Malakieh, 2019). In this article, we explore the realities of federal parole officers (POs) when working with people convicted of sex offenses under the employ of CSC, recognizing POs are public safety officials working within Canada's highly stressed criminal justice system (USJE, 2019). Specifically, we aim to understand certain exposures to potentially psychologically traumatic events (PPTs) by adding to knowledge about the elements informing—the context—of PPTs, which are understudied despite the association between PPTs and mental health disorders among correctional workers in Canada (Carleton et al., 2020a; Ricciardelli et al., 2020b, 2022a, 2022b; USJE, 2019). In response to this lacune of knowledge, we unpack the experiences of federal POs who work in both institutional and community settings while supervising people convicted of sex crimes (PCSCs) during or when preparing for community re-entry. We account for the impacts of their own gender and familial circumstances on their occupational experiences and vice versa. We examine nuances in experience with vicarious trauma—a source of PPTs—and the role of *collegial debriefing* where PO-peers enable social support for each other by validating their experiences and legitimizing pathways to care. We examine PPT exposure where POs' situations and cumulative experiences result in varied forms of distress (Carleton et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2019; Ricciardelli et al., 2020a, 2022b). Given parole work in Canada has received relatively little attention compared to research on incarceration (Ricciardelli et al., 2022b), we center the voices and experiences of POs to describe the occupational realities of their work both supervising PCSCs and supporting their re-entry into communities post incarceration.

First, we review literature on parole work in context of the responsibility POs assume for assessing risk. We then contextualize knowledge of PPTs and clarify terminology by situating our findings in the context of vicarious trauma. Next, we discuss our methods and situate our study as part of a wider research project in which various research outputs support our current results. Our present findings evince a broad range of complexity in both thinking about and responding to sex crimes. We examine vicarious trauma as experienced by POs in their occupational work supervising PCSCs and demonstrate how gender (i.e. being a female PO supervising men on parole) is a salient factor. This is followed with how familial circumstances shape perceptions of occupational stress. Finally, we conclude our findings by detailing how supervising PCSCs may contribute to operational stress injuries (OSIs) and in response, how POs informally engage in *collegial debriefing*. Specifically, we analyze the cumulative impact of vicarious trauma and other PPTs around the precarious boundaries in parole work and the cathartic utility of collegial debriefing. Recognizing limitations of our findings, we indicate future empirical and theoretical lines of inquiry for further investigation.

## Sex offenders and parole supervision

PCSCs occupy one of the most marginalized and loathed social positions in prison and society (Ricciardelli and Spencer, 2017). While heterogeneous in both the diverse nature of their offence pathways and personal characteristics, Payne (2008) observes the capacity for responding to PCSCs is confounded by variation in the use of technology across jurisdictions. Despite various tools available to POs, their capacity for communication remains constant and crucial. For instance, POs interact with PCSC clients by interrogating distortions, rationalizations, and justifications about criminal behavior. Yet POs also check-in with themselves and others interpersonally. More broadly still, POs communicate intra- and inter organizationally, that is, among various departments at work and with third-party community agencies. Vital to the role, then, is their capacity to establish boundaries, set communication strategies, and practice supportive team meetings (Payne, 2008).

Seto (2018) explains the responsibility for POs is to assess risks of sexual recidivism while supervising, classifying, and intervening in the lives of PCSCs. This considerable task concerns the *persistence* (i.e. probability of reoffending) and *severity* (i.e. the nature and extent) in the case of recidivism. While persistence refers to a statistical probability, severity refers to a quality that is concerned about “cross-over” (p. 164), meaning whether a PCSC perpetrates in escalation. For instance, if a perpetrator crosses over from a type of offence (e.g. noncontact Internet crimes to contact) or graduates to a wider breadth of offending behavior (e.g. crosses over from particular victim types such as in age or gender). While difficult to evaluate the distinction, it is significant in assessment to ensure “atypical sexual interests” (e.g. bestiality/pedophilia) are not conflated with “antisociality” (e.g. disregarding the welfare of others), which potentially drives disparities in sentencing through the imposition of unnecessarily stringent supervision requirements (Seto, 2018: 168) with which POs are required to negotiate. Thus, the detail and context of sex crimes, paired with excessively harsh conditions, exacerbate the complexity of PCSCs supervision and contributes to stress POs experience in their job of facilitating re-entry preparation and processes while navigating possible harms with rehabilitation needs.

*Social rehabilitation*, promoting access to supports in the community, and nuanced appreciation for the gradations in offending are salient (Canton and Padfield, 2019; McNeill, 2012). POs negotiate re-entry processes by communicating on behalf of the community that people on parole are citizens worthy of (re)integration (Duff, 2021), which is diminished when clients withdraw from relationships due to experiences of stigma, shame, fear, and embarrassment—all of which inhibit the capacity for POs to support desistance (Burchfield and Mingus, 2008). Collaborative intervention in providing care among treatment providers and POs, while engaging in substantive communication through community partnerships, is critical to supporting PCSCs (Mcgrath et al., 2002; Payne and DeMichele, 2010).

We consider the normative impact faced by POs and build upon a dearth of literature regarding experiences of parole work, especially for POs tasked with case managing PCSCs (Severson and Pettus-Davis, 2013). Their work is exhausting and

potentially psychologically traumatic as a result of being exposed to narratives of sexual violence. For example, delving into compilations of case file material, where POs must read, hear, and learn of sordid details—sometimes including fantasies of sex crimes yet or never to be committed—from perspectives of both victims and people who are criminalized (Severson and Pettus-Davis, 2013: 15). PCSCs attach heterogenous meanings to sex crimes; their deviations and the veracity with which they describe why they perpetrate such crimes represents an invasion into POs' psyche-social realities (Ennis and Home, 2003; Severson and Pettus-Davis, 2013; Way et al., 2004). Therefore, to formulate a therapeutic alliance and deliver responsive case planning that promotes desistance (Ricciardelli, 2018), POs become tied to the intimate details of their clientele. We are concerned with the toll this takes on their well-being while creating an appropriate response to managing sex crimes (Spencer et al., 2019, 2021).

### *Exposure to potentially psychologically traumatic events*

Exposures to psychological trauma may be understood through “emotional labor,” referencing the management of ones feelings about performing their occupational responsibilities (Hochschild, 1983), and thus how criminal justice comes to be understood and experienced (Phillips et al., 2021b: 246). POs engage in emotional labor through surface acting with PCSCs, as they regulate themselves to invoke displays for understanding them in their workplace (Phillips et al., 2021b: 7), but also to empathize with PCSC clients in a way that forms a connection for understanding them. POs therefore undertake “dirty work” (Spencer and Ricciardelli, 2022), meaning they engage with the repugnance of their clientele in good conscience to serve a greater good (Scott-Bottoms, 2020: 2), despite PCSCs occupying the lowest rungs of social and penal hierarchies due to stigma (Ricciardelli and Moir, 2013). Consequently, POs must negotiate their own experiences of well-being, in the context of their client's countertransference with stigma, while being repeatedly exposed to narratives of trauma.

PPTes result when individuals are directly or indirectly exposed to sexual violence, serious injury, and actual or threatened death (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Correctional workers, such as POs and their provincial/territorial counterparts working in probation, are recognized in Canada as being regularly exposed to PPTes (Oliphant, 2016). While 50% to 90% of the general population experience one or more PPTe during their lifetime, POs, like other public safety professionals experience *hundreds* or *thousands* of PPTe exposures from their occupational work (Carleton et al., 2019; Kilpatrick et al., 2013; Perrin et al., 2014). Revisions to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5 (DSM-5) now account for cumulative PPTe exposures as well as acute or standalone PPTes in diagnosing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (APA, 2013; Kilpatrick et al., 2013). Hence repeated exposure to PPTes can result in PTSD or many other possible mental health disorders (APA, 2013; Kilpatrick et al., 2013). For POs working in the community or in prisons, PPTe exposures are myriad and occurring directly and indirectly while fulfilling their occupational responsibilities such as reviewing case

files (Galatzer-Levy et al., 2011; Komarovskaya et al., 2011; Ricciardelli, 2019; Ricciardelli et al., 2020a, 2020b; Ricciardelli and Power, 2020). PPTes also include those associated with exposure to toxic substances, physical assault, sexual assault, and unwanted or uncomfortable sexual experiences (Carleton et al., 2019). The consequence being that, compared to the general population, correctional workers are at significantly greater risk of developing mental health disorders and contemplating suicidal behaviors (Berger et al., 2012; Carleton et al., 2018b, 2020a, 2020b; Faust and Ven, 2014; Haugen et al., 2012; Neria et al., 2011; Oliphant, 2016; Ricciardelli, 2019; Stanley et al., 2016).

Carleton et al. (2018a: 58) grouped correctional workers together (e.g. correctional officers, administrators, and parole/probation officers—collectively POs) and found that 54.6% of them screened positive for a mental disorder. In a second study about provincial correctional workers in Ontario, Canada (Carleton et al., 2020b), researchers found that 25.5% of POs screened positive for PTSD, 37.4% for major depressive disorder (MDD), and 33.1% for generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), with positive screens for *any* mental disorder at a prevalence of 63.2% (Carleton et al., 2020b: 8). Comorbidity here prevailed with 27.5% of POs screening positive for *three* or more mental disorders (p. 8). For POs who work with PCSCs, their occupational work constitutes a heterogeneous series of PPTe exposures, as they review case files and engage in intimate detail with their clients about maladaptive attitudes and criminal behavior in need of desistance.

### *Defusing “vicarious trauma” with “collegial debriefing”*

McCann and Pearlman (1990) first described *vicarious trauma* in reference to the negative changes in “cognition” POs may expect from repeated exposures to narratives of victimhood/perpetration. This differs from *compassion fatigue* which refers to the “emotional” exhaustion that results from the countertransference naturally occurring in worker–client relationships (Figley, 2013). *Secondary trauma* on the other hand, as defined by Figley (1993), encompasses the emotional distress experienced by clinicians working with trauma survivors, mimicking symptoms of PTSD (Figley, 2013; Newell and MacNeil, 2010; as cited in Severson and Pettus-Davis, 2013: 3).

POs experience trauma vicariously insofar as they learn about sexual violence that affects them in visceral ways (Catanese, 2010; Moulden and Firestone, 2007). This includes the following: recalling, dreaming, and suddenly re-experiencing events; avoidance behaviors; detachment from healthy activities and social supports; experiencing hypervigilance, and emotional outbursts; and physiological reactions like sleep disruptions (Figley, 2013). By *vicarious trauma* we mean the emotional, cognitive, and physical consequences that occur from intervening in the lives of both victims and perpetrators of sex crimes (Severson and Pettus-Davis, 2013: 3). The myriad responses POs experience as outcomes of their work with PCSCs is heterogeneous and variable (i.e. cognitively, morally, emotionally, somatically, etc.) in how it may occur in personal and professional life. As exposures to PPTes are diverse, we reason that expectant responses will also be varied (Carleton et al., 2019). Imperative to POs’ well-being, then, is effectively processing exposures to trauma

and one way of supporting this is by engaging colleagues to discuss PPTs thereby lessening the impact (Severson and Pettus-Davis 2013: 14). We refer to this as *collegial debriefing* when PO-peers help manage stress by legitimizing their experiences—normalizing them in a way that makes it easier to seek help when necessary—thus enabling fewer disruptions to personal and family life.

### Current study

While exposures to PPTs may not result in adverse outcomes, we nevertheless understand such exposure as contributing to disparities in well-being (Carleton et al., 2020a; Konyk and Ricciardelli, 2022). Understanding PPTs as precipitating experiences of psychological trauma and mental health injuries for POs (Ricciardelli et al., 2021b) leads to a better understanding of both the barriers and challenges among public safety professionals such as POs, who risk their well-being to promote safer communities in Canada (Oliphant, 2016; Ricciardelli et al., 2020a). We understand this as a diverse series of character wounds leading to “moral injury,” where repeated violations of personal values result in a cumulative impact of distress or functional impairment, as observed with PTSD (Griffin et al., 2019). We look to the experiences of POs interacting with PCSCs as a case study for the compromise in moral values endemic to correctional work, and position this as a powerful force for studying organizational behavior (Grossi and Berg, 1991: 79–80).

The cumulative impact of normalizing deviant sexual behavior over time is of concern where research has shown that people tend to underestimate the cathartic utility of their coping strategies (Carlsmith et al., 2008). For example, when a PO responds with anger, this leads to a vicious cycle as thinking about perpetration makes people angrier, it then becomes harder to think about anything else (p. 1317). Collegial debriefing focuses on the appropriateness in normalizing experiences, leading to outreach and support, rather than compromised integrity associated with *cynicism* which may impact their ability to appropriately assess risk (Spencer et al., 2019). Responsively addressing this affectual paradox requires appropriate strategies for coping with complex and adverse occupational conditions that prioritize well-being. Hence “job crafting” about the dirty work POs undertake with PCSCs is both tolling but necessary, as this work is deserving of recognition and resolution (Mawby and Worrall, 2013: 121). While *mindfulness*—the practice of inducing a state of being consciously aware—is showing promise in correctional work (Hillhouse et al., 2021), more is required to address the complex nature of adversity that POs face. As such, the current study unpacks how POs experience PPTs arising from their work with PCSCs, focusing on emergent themes that intensify or remedy such exposures.

### Methods

Recognizing a need to protect POs against occupational stress injuries (OSIs), our study was commissioned by the Union of Safety and Justice Employees (USJE,

2019) and this analysis is based on a larger qualitative investigation into the mental health and well-being of federal POs (Ricciardelli et al., 2022b). In total, 150 POs participated in semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2020; Hesse-Biber, 2010), in which we focused on facets of organizational culture including workload, job satisfaction, and well-being while seeking to gain "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) and allow coherent themes to emerge through analysis (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Recruitment was enabled through CSC and USJE. Information was sent via internal listservs, and we found recruitment was supported informally by participants who referred colleagues to us constituting a snowball sample. Our project was approved by The Research Ethics Board at Memorial University of Newfoundland (#20201495).

All interviews ( $n = 150$ ) occurred in August and September 2020 in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and due to the confounding factor of geographic limitations, we elected to interview participants over the telephone. We found this approach enabled rapport to the extent participants felt comfortable discussing sensitive topics (Mealer and Jones, 2014; Novick, 2008; Smith, 2005), despite recognizing face-to-face is the preferred method for qualitative interviewing. Vast majority of interviews were conducted in English ( $n = 145$ ) and lasted between 75 and 120 minutes; a small portion of our sample requested to be and were interviewed in French ( $n = 5$ ). Questions were broad such that participants could guide discussions to cover topics they felt most relevant while elaboration was sought through probing. The subject of supervising PSCs arose organically while discussing the well-being of clients and was not a part of the interview guide.

All data (i.e. participants' words) were transcribed verbatim and our method of analysis followed a semi-grounded constructed approach (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser and Strauss, 1967, 2017; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Transcript coding was open-ended to determine emergent themes as with our current findings. We utilized QSR NVivo software to assist coding but first tasked three members of our research team to independently and sequentially code five transcripts for developing an initial set of codes. This practice supported consistency in coding among the rest of the team and promoted a qualitative equivalent of inter-rater reliability (Hemmler et al., 2022). The remaining transcripts were then coded by the rest of the research team individually, allowing for refinement through collective discussion, such that recognition for emergent codes was apparent.

Participants consisted of individuals who had worked in the PO role where an estimated total of 1600 POs are employed within CSC's workforce (Ricciardelli et al., 2022b). Based on their predominant workplace we counted them as either institutional ( $n = 96$ ; 64.0%) or community ( $n = 54$ ; 36.0%) situated POs. The majority of participants identified as white ( $n = 128$ ; 85%), females (76.0%;  $n = 114$ ), between the ages of 35 and 44 ( $n = 64$ ; 42.7%) with 84.7% ( $n = 127$ ) indicating they had a university degree. Exactly 50.0% ( $n = 75$ ) had worked for CSC for between 10 and 19 years. Further information regarding employment history and location, identification, and inter/intra organizational public safety experience are well documented (Ricciardelli et al., 2022b), thus we limit our discussion here to the article at hand.

## Results: broad range of offenses

No evidence was found to suggest PCSCs represented homogeneity as a group aside from the fact their behavior was criminal and, to varying degrees, they all experience stigma. Their crimes range in diversity from those that cause feelings of social violation (e.g. incest, child-related crimes) to those that have no direct victim (e.g. consuming pornography) and all that falls in between (e.g. result of intoxication, misunderstandings of consent). P22 explained: "it's very different, are we talking about an incest offender or are we talking about child porn guy or are we talking about a pedophile, like very different offences, different risk levels.... lots of different categories." Likewise, P15, reported "I have my opinion personally on the fact, but it doesn't ... it's not part of my job so. You have varying degrees of the type of offender you can have on your caseload when it comes to a sex offence" (e.g. historical versus recent or non/contact offenses). This is to say, following Spencer and Ricciardelli (2020), the assemblage of what is a PCSC, the offenses that fall under this category, and the intensity of shame and repugnance attached to this offense are manifold.

POs also recognize that some sex offences pertained to an orientation which manifested in ethical and legal concerns (Seto, 2018). For example, where a PCSC was age-orientated to children with whom consent is always an impossibility, there was no "cure" per se but only opportunities to redirect attraction. For instance, P19 said: "they just have to learn it's not ok... it's your biology so for a sex offender program it's all about learning um how to redirect your attraction ... because it's not ok, society has said it is not ok," while P21 concluded "it's a sexual attraction issue." In what follows, we unpack emergent themes tied to the supervising of this very diverse group of PCSCs. We begin by looking at nuances in vicarious trauma that POs experience, especially as it relates to gender and familial situations that can drive certain challenges home. We conclude by elucidating realities about OSIs and how POs reported valuing informal collegial debriefing as a form of collective support.

### *Vicarious trauma*

A prevalent emergent theme among POs who supervised PCSCs was their cumulative experience with vicarious trauma constituted by frequent PPTs. Many described the PSCs on their caseloads as being impactful, the cases that "affect me the most. When I read their offences it's the most disturbing for sure" (P20). These officers were particularly impacted by reading their client case files, which is necessary to protect public safety and to help prevent future reoffending. P14, for instance, explains:

where you're having to document you know all of their violent history and that you know we have to read the details of that and particularly the sex offences can become quite, there's a lot of vicarious trauma that happens from having to read the details all of the sex offences... I think people become desensitized to it I don't think that's a good thing



because I don't think you're doing the proper thing with the impact of it on you and I found for me that I might be reading something that's fairly mundane in ... terms of sex offences to a lay person ... they're horrified but you become desensitized in terms of the you know sort of level of what you're reading. There might be something that is fairly mundane that will impact me more and it's probably a compilation of things that I have read now ... It was probably the compilation of things that I had read previously that were worse. And this [a particular offense where a stepfather removed the threads from the crotch of his stepdaughters' pyjamas] was sort of like the straw that broke the camel's back.

P14, as their words suggest, has much experience reading the cases of PCSCs, however what impacts them most is often not the criminal details of the case but the more simplistic behaviors that underpin, facilitate, or strategize the harm. For example, reading cases is cumulative in effect and content, and POs lack control over what details in the files will resonate with a negative impact. More so, it is the "little things" that underpin violation that stuck with POs and reveal intention to plan harm that can create moments of distress (Spencer and Ricciardelli, 2022). P1 explains, similarly, that "you get a lot of vicarious trauma from the twisted things these guys can do. Some of these guys are a lot sicker than even the movies." While P12, who has "actually worked with sex offenders my whole career" described that:

I am finding though over the years—and I'm sure this just like cumulative—is that reading some of the material is really difficult sometimes. I am more aware and cognizant of how when I first started, I would find it interesting, and I'd be delving into everything and reading every detail and trying to figure out how to help a guy. Where now, there are moments when I start to read a file and I literally have to shut the file because I'm not emotionally prepared to read the rest of the material because it's really disturbing.

P12's words describe a change, over time, in how they are affected by cases vicariously, again drawing attention to the cumulative nature of trauma exposure and the consequence on self, specifically their ability to process and 'make sense' of other persons' actions. P64 explains another impact of working these cases: "so if there's one hazard of the job besides physical danger it would be I would say it's the slow erosion of significance and disturbance to these horrendous crimes." They speak to the eventual normalization or desensitization with repeat exposure to sex offenses. The challenge however remains that over time, no matter how one feels prepared to manage their clients, the lack of control over when knowledge or information will mandate a psychological response (that they may be unprepared for)—thus, normalization is not protection; instead, normalization may serve as a precursor to a significant traumatic response. There are a variety of cases in which vicarious trauma can resonate, like when POs are women or have a family, two emergent themes to which we now turn.

### *Being a woman working with PCSCs*

Several POs, at least ten, spoke about the complexities of being a woman while working with PCSCs. Where misogyny was apparent from men convicted of sex crimes, who often perceived themselves as dominant over women, such a strained dynamic created a tension in case supervision for women POs. For instance, P54 indicates that:

With sex offenders comes a lot of issues typically being managed by a woman. I have to deal with a lot of that ... the higher the risk the more likely they are to be just a blatant chauvinist ... that's just completely anecdotal but that is my experience. That's one of the biggest challenges, just issues with women.

P54 describes challenges being a woman and working with high risk PCSCs, specifically. They believe some client's attitudes toward women compromises their ability to provide their clients the support they require and, in response, add tensions to already challenging occupational work. Others, like P121, drew on experiences with PCSCs with violent propensities toward women, explaining:

two [cases] specifically I can think of who have a lot of violent feelings towards females and females in power. Whether it's their upbringing or their history or a traumatic event in their past, they cannot be alone with female staff, and I have, um, one of those right now that he is not—well I'm, I'm not able to pull him into a room by myself and speak with him. He'll have to be in an enclosure, or I have to have a male guard with me.

P121 faces an increased threat of physical harm in supervision practices, requiring male accompaniment or the instigation of physical protection when trying to support her client. Women POs also evince that the invasive discussions they had to have with clientele as, at times, difficult. Recognizing that "it's not always easy to go get the answers that you want with them because sometimes they're very shy sometimes they have a lot of shame about what they did so like I say it really differs from one to the next" (P140). But despite this shame, their obligation is to talk to clients about sexual acts including attitudes and behaviors:

You have to talk about things like masturbation fantasies. Like what are you thinking about? How are you dealing with thoughts that pop up into your head? How often? Frequency. Like I don't—nobody wants to know this information ... but it's part of the job. Like if you're going to manage a sex offender you need to be—you have to manage their fantasies. Like you have to be able to have an open connection with them in order to understand their fantasies and their thinking cause that's what triggers all the other things that lead to the behaviour which leads to victims (P90).

P90 here describes having invasive conversations with criminalized men about their sexual intentions and actions, which at times, like many others, they find such conversations challenging, awkward, and even uncomfortable. Each representing an invasion of privacy and a sharing of details that is not the norm in

society. Despite the gender of the PO, a possible outcome of listening to those on the caseload and reading their criminal files was the experience of vicarious trauma.

### *The effects of having a family*

Particularly difficult for many POs was instances where their client's criminality impacted youth the same age or gender as their own children or of family members. Describing working from home during waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, P22 explains that the impact of their work:

changed a lot, we're working from home. We've got our kids at home so that's a dynamic that makes it interesting when you're dealing with not running numbers on the computer with my kids around and talking to sex offenders and about violence and all sorts of things that they shouldn't know anything about. So, there's kind of a boundary thing there which you know in this line of work boundaries are important.

P22 feels that the connection with the convicted person increased in strength of impact on their personal life when working from home and seeing their own children while dealing with sex-crime files on their caseload. Thus, a significant drawback or "spill over" of remote supervisory work perplexes the boundaries between personal living space and occupational responsibilities (Phillips et al., 2021a). However, although exacerbated by the pandemic, the phenomenon is not novel. For instance, P5 described that "when I'm reading about a victim who is the same age as my daughter, like that stuff really hits home and it's so hard." Others speak to the challenge when a client's victim shares traits with their own family members and how this is intensified in impact when "some of the sex offenders who deny or just don't get it and I have a teenage daughter, it's hard not to think about those cases because you know they're getting out eventually and they have no remorse, so there's certain cases that stick with you" (P6).

The lack of remorse, combined with the similarities between the victim and their own child makes the case "stick," creating not only vicarious trauma, but also fear for public safety, including that of their own children. P20 also felt that "having a daughter now for myself. I feel I'm more sensitive to sex offenders who have been convicted of sexual assaults on young children. That bothers me a lot more 'cause I can now empathize with what that family member or what that parent was feeling." In some instances, participants spoke about having to "recuse" themselves from a case because they were unable to "compartmentalize" (P9), given the similarities between family members and the PCSC's victim(s). P9 has only recused "twice in twenty-five years," feeling the vicarious impacts of the trauma imposed by their caseload. Others, like P24, reported that "I've had other parole officer friends who've had children and once they have children, they are deploying to a different department they don't want to work with sex offenders anymore and we don't get to say who we get—we get who we get and that's it." Thus, again, showing the direct reminder of their own personal circumstances can and does affect some POs' supervisory abilities.

## *Sex offender cases contributing to mental health injuries*

The vicarious trauma tied to the supervision of PCSC was also described by select participants as a direct precursor to a mental health injury—specifically, an OSI. For instance, P142 explains “all my nightmares are about sex offenders, the worst of the worst.” Others, speaking to the “mental health aspect of what we do is, I’m often shocked, I can’t get over the fact that sometimes that given what I do and what I read and see and hear all day everyday, and it’s worse for some parole [officers]; it’s working with sex offenders it’s just hard to describe what it does to you....” (P3). P3 described an impact from working on such cases that they cannot clearly articulate, however, they put forth that the impacts are severe. P39 notes: “I find it really disturbing just because sometimes you read their files and some of the details it’s, it makes me really, really uncomfortable and angry at times.” P39 explains experiencing anger after reading case files, while others talked about crying or feeling sad, but whatever the emotion, what is consistent is that some files pushed forth emotional reactions, which can impact long-term mental health. P1 felt that “there’s a lot of individual cases that contributed to me going off for sure... Most of the trauma I’ve been enduring is, like I said, talking to offenders who’ve committed heinous sex offences and listening to them talk like it’s normal. That’s what really messed me up.” P1 directly correlates their sick leave to the supervision of specific PCSC cases, thus signifying how such cases can “mess” one up in terms of their mental health and thus overall well-being. P33, directly correlates the birth of their children to the greater impact on self that emerged from having PCSCs on their caseload:

That’s a tough one actually because it’s only been probably about the last 2 years that I’ve struggled with that one. Prior to having my children, it didn’t bother me whatsoever. I mean, that being said, I don’t treat them any differently than I do any of my other offenders. I have more of a reaction to reading their file information than I did before as well while I was on my recent mat leave I was diagnosed with PTSD.

P33 reports a PTSD diagnosis, an OSI, which is correlated directly with their supervision of PCSCs. Although still psychologically healthy, P68 ponders: “sometimes this is something that I sort of wonder ‘what the long-term impact will be on me’ because it sort of just becomes second nature like most of the time moving through it and it doesn’t really elicit a response for me.” Here, POs feel that they “probably should have some type of response to that [working with PCSC]” wondering when the response may emerge, recognizing there will be a lasting effect of their occupational work. P107, who asserts they treat all PCSCs “respectfully,” recognizes their occupation has left them “more on edge I suppose I’m more alert.” Perhaps it is for these reasons that others, like P29, described needing a “break” from managing sex offenders, particularly after having a child. She explains that previously, the:

majority of the cases were sex offenders, and it was another reason why I didn’t want to stay after my mat[ernity] leave. It definitely wears on you, and it is hard to deal with. You

need a break from it sometimes, I mean I still get sex offenders on my caseload now, but it's mixed in with a lot of other crimes, so it doesn't feel like it's who I'm primarily dealing with.

P29 is indicating that casework exclusively with PCSCs is draining. Meanwhile P108 talks about the "professional" and "personal" impacts of their occupational work, particularly if they feel they cannot detect the possibility for sexual recidivism. They explain that:

some of them have gone a long time committing sexual offences without actually being detected. So, it always makes me think like 'oh like what I'm supervising [is] an offender but he is smooth like you know or smooth enough or sneaky enough to continue committing these sexual offences while being supervised by me'. That's always a big concern for me.... And I would have emotions, like 'damn this guy was being supervised by me and then you know ended up hurting someone'.

Thus, their psychological injury is a result of feeling personal responsibility that follows if someone on their caseload reoffends. Overall, as P128 states, "it really kind of takes a chunk out of your soul having to sit and talk to a man ... [details crime], but at the same time you have to make sure that you're laying out his correctional plan appropriately. Giving him all the available opportunities to make change and to come up with what is needed for him to succeed if he wants to." Such a predicament places the POs in a precarious position where they must balance the rehabilitation needs of the person on their caseload with their own feelings of fear and concern regarding the threat that those in their charge pose to the community.

### *Supporting each other*

Some POs discussed the support tied to their relationships with their colleagues. With gratitude, P26, said: "It's hard. Thankfully I have a good team here where we can all talk, like the POs can all meet and chat about things and just kind of, it's really cathartic to just discuss things ... like how to deal with it." P26 draws attention to coping arising from collective discussion by talking to someone who understands the complexities of supervising individuals convicted of sex offenses. Collegial support was valued as the common feeling was that intimate partners and the general public failed to grasp why POs elected to work with PCSCs, and the challenges tied to such work.

P135 sighed as they report: "I have a few on my caseload ... again this is a huge testament to the fact that I have a good team, that I can kind of debrief when things maybe are a little bit jarring." Meanwhile, P5 notes: "my colleagues trust that [when] they come to my office, and they need to cry, or they need to talk, I'm going to keep it in confidence. But I think that we need to kind of stay human about that stuff too." The need to be "human" denotes that informal collegial support by peers was necessary for their occupational responsibilities as not all POs have the capacity to do so. P12 says "so for me I personally don't have a problem like I actually have

colleagues who find it very difficult to work with anyone who's done any type of sex crime against any person." Recognizing the impact of such cases, a few participants also spoke of the need to engage in self-care as a means to cope with the potentially psychologically traumatic realities they were exposed to while performing their occupational responsibilities. Here, P5 says "sometimes there's things that really, really get to me and I just have to sit there and just let it pass through me, if I have to cry, I have to cry, and then get into what I'm doing. I think it's mostly the offences against children." Thus, crying and allowing for moments of reflection was a personal strategy to manage the complex emotions which underpin the supervision of PCSCs.

## Discussion

Crucial to any discussion about PCSCs and their supervision is recognizing that both sex-related crimes and their perpetrators are diverse, and how correctional workers respond is also dynamic and heterogeneous. Some POs reported no personal issue with supervising any individual, regardless of their crime; many others described the work as emotionally gnawing at them. This finding supports the utility in diagnostic revisions to the DSM-5 for PTSD and its cumulative effect (APA, 2013; Carleton et al., 2019). We found POs' realities interacting with PCSCs varied across domains of gender, familial circumstance, and the quality and degree to which POs endured morally injurious experiences, which we surmise precipitates PPTEs—and critically, impacts perceptions of stress. Moreover, POs described relief from collegial debriefing, as a strategy to aid in stress management, which collectively normalized experiences of informal support to one another. While we acknowledge normalization might serve to minimize psychological trauma, we observe a need for greater provisions of time and space—where POs may engage in informal discussions—as precursory for laying foundations to standardized peer-support programming (Cracknell, 2022; Milliard, 2020). That organizational shift for enabling experiential discussions proactively (e.g. team building exercises) is supported by our findings of *informality* as vital to POs' responding appropriately to vicarious trauma (e.g. crying). Collegial debriefing thus enables normalizing responses which potentiates pathways to responsive care, making it more acceptable to reach out for assistance when necessary, and informing how supports may be subsequently standardized (i.e. mandatory check-ins with psychologist and/or case-work term limits). A secondary benefit of this approach in the workplace is capacity building around the time and space which extends into personal life including the correctional workers' home and family. Thus, tertiary gains might include also cultivating other efficacious practices of well-being both operationally and organizationally.

The numerous little things or mundane details which POs articulated as sticking with them most, hitting home for some, represented a cumulative impact that their work took over time. We found this occurred when POs described being messed up, suggesting exposures to PPTEs are related to vicarious trauma and associated with OSIs. Resonating here are findings elsewhere in Canada where provincial POs screened positively for some type of mental at a prevalence of 63.2% and

comorbidity was significant as POs screened for *three* or more mental disorders at a rate of 27.5% (Carleton et al., 2020b: 8). Hence, for POs working with PCSCs, their occupational work constitutes a series of diverse PPTE exposures. Such nuanced detail are both the substance to formulating a therapeutic alliance by cultivating responsive case plans in support of desistance (Ricciardelli, 2018); but also, culminating in morally injurious conditions—over time—as violations to ones' personal values contribute to distress and OSIs, including PTSD (Griffin et al., 2019).

We understand this distress as a slow erosion of personal values consistent with the compromise of morals endemic to correctional work (Grossi and Berg, 1991: 79–80), such as the adoption of cynical attitudes by those who undertake the dirty work of policing sex crimes (Spencer et al., 2019). Over time the cathartic utility of normalizing deviant sexual behavior, rather than normalizing POs' responses to abnormal events, does not provide sufficient release as a coping strategy and likely exacerbates distress (Carlsmith et al., 2008). This chronicity of stress working in a morally injurious climate may cumulate in an acute PPTEs, but also sustained by POs over the duration of their career (Siegrist, 1996: 27). The longer a PO works with PCSCs, the greater their dose-response, implicating a capacity limit for witnessing severe human suffering (Carleton et al., 2019). Our findings support the need to set "term limits" on PO assignments, especially while we continue to understand what an optimal period of time is—and the conditions to which any given PO should be responsible—for managing PCSCs on their caseload (Severson and Pettus-Davis, 2013: 14). In support of this we conclude on two points of discussion: boundary-setting and awareness about pathways for ameliorating vicarious trauma.

The climate that leads to inner conflict for POs may cumulate in PPTEs where clearer boundary-setting may be ameliorative to OSIs and circumvent disturbances arising from supervision. As a major function of POs responsibilities revolve around assessing risk it is informative to consider the gendered nature in which subjectivities of risk, vulnerability, and perceptions of weakness pertain to parole work with PCSCs (Ricciardelli et al., 2015). On one hand men are disproportionately convicted of sexual crimes (Shields and Cochran, 2020), while more than three quarters of our participants in this study identified as female. Future research is encouraged to unpack this dynamic, especially in parole work with PCSCs as it pertains to perceptions of stress and risk among men and women POs.

Such a gendered dynamic elucidates how distress may occur in the setting of professional and personal boundaries. For example, POs embracing stoicism in the presence of disgust, fear, shame, or anger for instance must manage how they display their emotions to achieve the goals of the agency in which they are employed (Phillips et al., 2021b: 3). Therefore, how does such emotional labor play into the manner men and women conduct risk assessments and perceive subjectivities of sexual recidivism? We found POs characterized cases as misogynistic, which for female POs, may potentiate a morally injurious situation that exacerbates stress. The degradation of personal living space, particularly since the pandemic, illustrates how POs engage with PCSCs, remotely, from the sanctity of their homes (Morran, 2008; Norman and Ricciardelli, 2021; Phillips et al., 2021a; Westaby et al.,

2016). How, where, and when do POs then enjoy opportunities to turn off features of their dirty work and decompress? We conclude next on a few notes about collegial debriefing in response to this inquiry, in which POs are encouraged to cultivate the time and space necessary to engage in cathartic release by coping in more responsive ways that may mitigate stress and promote well-being. For instance, precarity in boundaries is evidenced by emotional disturbances like nightmares (Ricciardelli and Spencer, 2017: 61), where sleep disturbances represent one of many symptoms associated with vicarious trauma and PTSD (Ricciardelli et al., 2021b).

Uncertainty is a concern to well-being in correctional work (Ricciardelli et al., 2021a), especially for POs who need to suppress emotional responses. Where this entails discussions about masturbation fantasies involving violence against women and children, an elucidation about variations in job stress over time (Sur and Ng, 2014: 80) pertains to our findings of female POs supervising males convicted of sex crimes. This is the case when the POs' situation changes (e.g. enters motherhood). Life events for POs—like having a child—created a context that led to identifying ones' own kin with potential victimhood. Partnership with community through nuanced understanding and support for the work of POs engaging with PCSCs' re-entry is an aspect of the conditions necessary for (re)integration (Canton and Padfield, 2019; McNeill, 2012) and necessary for mobilizing knowledge about the nature of sex crimes and variances of distress that POs endure by bearing witness to atrocities vis-a-vis their work with PCSCs (Griffin et al., 2019: 357). We argue recognition for the work POs undertake may support their well-being as a means of social rehabilitation.

POs described PCSC case work as invoking emotional reactions including anger, sadness, and the need to debrief. We understand exposures to vicarious trauma as emotional, cognitive, and physical consequences that occur from intervening in the lives of both victims and perpetrators of sex-related crimes. While POs acknowledged the need for self-care, and alluded to the potential of mindfulness practice in correctional work (Hillhouse et al., 2021), simply crying was considered as a form of catharsis that signified a purification of potentially toxic emotions (Doerries, 2015: 36). We propose catharsis may be an important line of inquiry pertaining to moral injury and stress-related illness where feelings pertain also to *anhedonia*—the inability to feel (Griffin et al., 2019: 352). We found POs describe this as an experience of “desensitization” to the extent that case work eventually elicited no response, and the chronicity of stress represented a cumulative exposure to PPTEs.

Validating the experiences of POs was a means of legitimizing normal responses to abnormal events as efficaciously managing stress. PO-peers valued collegial debriefing as a way of normalizing vicarious trauma, making such trauma manageable, by enabling a pathway to seek help when necessary. This reduces disturbances to personal/family life when collegial debriefing is enabled as an antecedent to responsively address the imperative of psychological trauma in parole work. While we acknowledge the glaring limitation that normalizing experiences of distress may further de-legitimize POs' concerns within a culture that POs



feel unrecognized and undervalued, we aver how this may be a precursor for cultivating pathways to care and enable POs to reach out for assistance. This differs dramatically from normalizing sexually deviant behavior in a way that desensitizes POs' experience leading to feelings of apathy and cynicism. As such, further investigation may better understand circumstances of stigma and cynicism impacting PO supports. In addition, we affirm that collegial debriefing should be seen as a starting point that leads to broader organizational recognition and therapeutic responses to the psychological trauma and harms experienced by POs while working with PCSCs. That is, the breaking down of barriers to discuss psychological trauma amongst colleagues, evinces the necessity of organizational infrastructures that provide continuous therapy for POs.

## **Conclusion**

We probed into PPTs and morally injurious experiences of interacting with PCSC based on the chronicity and cumulative impact of occupational stress evident in interview data collected from POs working for CSC. We found vicarious trauma was related to emotional, cognitive, and physical disturbances based on repeated and variant exposures to narratives of victimhood/perpetration, which for some POs gnawed at them over time. This was especially the case for POs' personal/professional boundaries where a multitude of character wounds occur endemically as moral values become compromised in correctional work. We found heterogeneity in both sex-crime behavior as well as how POs responded to its associated adversity. Generally, distress occurred through domains of gender (i.e. female POs supervising a male convicted of sex related crimes) and familial circumstance (i.e. life events such as being partnered and having kids). Such a predicament places the POs in a precarious position where they must balance the rehabilitation needs of the individual with their own feelings of fear and concern regarding the threat that those in their charge pose to the community. Responding to such disturbances was met effectively by informal collegial debriefing, evincing a need to investigate the utility of catharsis to cope. We conclude that experiences of distress, leading to mental health challenges such as PTSD, may necessitate casual and informal approaches. That is, collegial debriefing may be an antecedent to presuppositions of any standardized peer-support approach that must responsively align with POs stated needs.

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