

Issue #78: Evidence Informed Resources to Address Stress and Trauma in Corrections Officers

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Corrections workers in US prisons and jail facilities oversee over 1.7 million incarcerated individuals¹. Corrections workers comprise over 400 thousand personnel² in job categories such as corrections officers (COs), healthcare providers, teachers, vocational instructors, chaplains, counselors, drug treatment specialists, food service, and maintenance personnel³. The demands and high-stress nature of their job tasks and working conditions place COs at higher risk for adverse mental health challenges than their peers in other professions. COs suffer high rates of stress, burnout, and psychological distress from traumatic events experienced on the job. This article summarizes evidence-based resources to address stress and trauma in corrections officers through a recent literature review and national survey study.

We conducted a **scoping review of literature and a national survey** of corrections officers to learn about resources available and resource needs of correctional workers in relation to stress and trauma on the job. Stakeholder members of a [National Corrections Collaborative](#) (NCC), the [National Institute of Corrections](#) (NIC), and the [Center for the Promotion of Health in the New England Workplace](#) (CPH-NEW) contributed to the study design and data collection instruments to ensure that correctional workers' perspectives were reflected and addressed. These individuals served as the NCC Project Taskforce, a multidisciplinary group committed to advancing knowledge and practice in correctional health and well-being.

The **scoping review** used 5 literature databases with pre-identified inclusion and exclusion criteria as advised by the NCC Project Taskforce and NIC representatives. The literature search included intervention studies published in the last 20 years. The scoping review identified 1,508 studies, of which 25 studies met the criteria for trauma-related interventions. The numbers of each intervention type represented in the included studies were: needs assessment (4), participatory engagement (3), stress reduction techniques (5), peer health mentoring and COs mental health programs (6), organizational management approaches (3), mental health [population] awareness training (2), and wellness (2).

Following the scoping review the research team, including the NCC Project Taskforce implemented a **national survey** in early 2022 to characterize utilization of programs and other resources that address trauma and stress among workers in criminal justice facilities. We asked the correctional middle managers and senior administrators about usage of specific resources identified in the scoping review and their appropriateness for meeting the needs of the COs. We asked COs about their awareness, use, and helpfulness of the resources. Resources were assessed in four categories: policies; practices; peer support programs; and leadership and staff training. Information on participant demographics and work-related characteristics was also collected.

A total of 1,371 participants from 38 states responded to the survey. The top three resources were identified in each category and are listed in Table 1. The survey findings identified gaps in CO awareness of resources and discrepant perceptions of COs, middle managers and senior administrators on resource use, helpfulness and fitting the needs of COs. We presented the findings from this project during two [NIC webinars](#) for COs, middle managers and senior administrators. A white paper is forthcoming.

Table 1. Most Common Stress and Trauma Resources for Corrections Workers Identified by Survey Participants (n=1,371)

Category	Top 3 Resources
Policies	Reporting of traumatic incidents to staff at work, clear job descriptions, and debriefing after traumatic incidents
Practices	Referral to Employee Assistance Program (EAP), internal sharing of positive employee recognition, and a health and well-being committee
Peer Support Programs	Staff peer support teams to support emotional and mental health, peer mentoring of new staff, and an internal trauma / critical incident team of co-workers
Leader and Staff Training	Staff education of non-invasive, de-escalation, defensive-tactics training, management and leadership skills training, and workforce focused on Mental Health First Aid

Given the modest number of studies that met inclusion criteria for this study, more research is needed to evaluate evidence-based practices that address trauma and stress in criminal justice facilities. Correctional workforce engagement in this process is critical and is a key challenge. The support of senior leadership is required for COs to participate in the design, development, the implementation of, and the evaluation of such resources. Examples of policy, funding, and systems support for meaningful engagement include meeting time, facility space, and shift coverage to enable CO participation time. Stress and trauma resources need to be evaluated locally to ensure that they are meeting the needs of COs and are feasible to implement with management and leadership support. Finally, senior leaders need to ensure that stress and trauma resources are communicated to COs, are readily accessible, and that COs are given the encouragement and time needed to use the resources.

References

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