

Wellness Challenges for Law Enforcement Personnel

In the United States, there are more than 800,000 sworn law enforcement officers.¹ The mental health and wellness of law enforcement personnel² involved in the prevention and interdiction of child exploitation are vital for the safety of our communities. Failure to provide proper support and services to protect the overall well-being and safety of these professionals is not only harmful to them but also impacts their families and puts public safety in jeopardy.

“The repeated exposure to obscene, toxic and exceptionally disturbing pictures and videos of child victims is routinely ranked among the top four stressors in the law enforcement profession, following only a fatal line-of-duty shooting, the line-of-duty death of a fellow officer, and the survival of a physical attack.”

*Meredith Krause Ph.D.*³

Researchers identify law enforcement as one of the most stressful occupations in the United States.⁴ Within the law enforcement profession, those who are constantly exposed to details, images, and videos of child sexual abuse cope with an even greater strain on their mental health.⁵ Daily exposure to child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) and regular engagement with victims and survivors of child sexual abuse can have widespread and prolonged impacts on the dedicated professionals working to protect children and apprehend offenders.

Law enforcement personnel constantly experience dangerous and challenging work-related situations.⁶ As discussed in the Offender Psychology chapter of this report, the unique psychological dynamics of child exploitation offenders require special care to protect officers’ physical safety when they make personal contact with offenders or execute search and arrest warrants. However, the mental health impacts are also pressing. Law enforcement professionals are more likely to experience high levels of trauma, burnout, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than other occupations.⁷ This stress and trauma can lead to cardiovascular disease, digestive disorders, heart attack, and stroke. Family, romantic, and other relationships can also be negatively impacted. Personnel who work in this field are at greater risk of mental health issues, including mood disturbances (such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder) and suicidal ideation.⁸ Law

¹ Updated estimates 2019; available at: <https://nleomf.org/facts-figures/law-enforcement-facts> (*Law Enforcement Facts*, 2019)

² For the purposes of this document, a law enforcement agency is a government agency involved in the detection, investigation, or prosecution of, or the supervision or incarceration of any person for, any violation of law.

³ In Harm’s Way, FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, January 2009 <https://leb.fbi.gov/file-repository/archives/january09leb.pdf/view>

⁴ Purba, A. Demou, E. The relationship between organizational stressors and mental wellbeing within police officers: a systematic review. *BMC Public Health* 19, 1286 (2019).

⁵ Quick, J., & Henderson, D. (2016). Occupational Stress: Preventing Suffering, Enhancing Wellbeing. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 13(5), 459. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph13050459>

⁶ Donnelly, E., Valentine, C., & Oehme, K. (2015). Law enforcement officers and Employee Assistance Programs. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, 38(2), 206–220. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-11-2014-0116>

⁷ Burruss, G. W., Holt, T. J., & Wall-Parker, A. (2018). The Hazards of Investigating Internet Crimes Against Children: Digital Evidence Handlers’ Experiences with Vicarious Trauma and Coping Behaviors. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 43(3), 433–447. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-017-9417-3>

⁸ O’Keefe, L. C., Brown, K. C., & Christian, B. J. (2014). Policy Perspectives on Occupational Stress. *Workplace Health & Safety*, 62(10), 432–438. <https://doi.org/10.3928/21650799-20140813-02>

enforcement professionals suffer higher rates of substance abuse, domestic violence, suicide, and other maladaptive coping mechanisms.⁹ Sadly, research has found that law enforcement officers are at higher risk to have suicidal ideation than the general population.¹⁰ While more research is needed on the unique risk posed to officers and other law enforcement professionals coping with exposure to child sexual abuse and child sexual abuse content, these effects are deeply concerning.



The impact of stress, fatigue, and burnout not only affects individuals and their families, but has organization-wide effects, including decreased employee performance, high rates of employee absence, workplace conflicts between employees, and higher levels of turnover.¹¹ In some situations, law enforcement professionals have also faced increased financial burdens for medication management and treatment for both physical and mental health conditions, resulting from significant work-related stress.¹²

Child Exploitation Cases and the Well-Being of Law Enforcement Professionals

Law enforcement professionals across the globe working child exploitation cases are chronically exposed to extremely disturbing situations and material. In addition to the risk factors shared by others in law enforcement personnel, they suffer from repeated exposure to extreme violence and exploitation of the most vulnerable victims – children, including infants. Frequent exposure to such material and the depravity of the cases has significant physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual repercussions for law enforcement professionals, often resulting in secondary traumatic stress. Unwanted recall of images and material, hypervigilance, sleep disturbances, and maladaptive coping mechanisms like social isolation are all signs of secondary traumatic stress.¹³

Exacerbating Factors for Law Enforcement Well-Being

⁹ Burruss, G. W., Holt, T. J., & Wall-Parker, A. (2018). The Hazards of Investigating Internet Crimes Against Children: Digital Evidence Handlers' Experiences with Vicarious Trauma and Coping Behaviors. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 43(3), 433–447. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-017-9417-3>

¹⁰ Violanti, J., Charles, L., Hartley, T. (2008). Shift-work and suicide ideation among police officers.

¹¹ Developing a Law Enforcement Stress Program for Officers and Their Families, P. Finn & J. E. Tomz, Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, December 1996, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles/163175.pdf>

¹² Stephens, C., Long, N., & Miller, I. (1997). The impact of trauma and social support on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A study of New Zealand police officers. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 25(4), 303–314.

¹³ Polak, S., Bailey, R., & Bailey, E. (2019). Secondary Traumatic Stress in the Courtroom: Suggestions for Preventing Vicarious Trauma Resulting from Child Sexual Abuse Imagery. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 70(2), 69–75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jfcj.12137>

Multiple factors, including the following, can exacerbate the negative effects of working on child exploitation cases¹⁴:

- Lack of supportive leadership and culture within law enforcement;
- Investigative challenges;
- Workplace isolation;
- Officer safety concerns;
- Lack of investigative resources; and
- Lack of mental health professional resources.

Law Enforcement Agency Leadership and Culture

Child exploitation cases are handled by law enforcement professionals at all levels, including those in local, state, federal, territory, and tribal jurisdictions. Many agencies have knowledgeable and supportive leadership that proactively address wellness as part of their agency operations or through the child exploitation investigations program. Unfortunately, leadership in some agencies do not fully understand the significant impact of child exploitation cases on the mental health of those involved. This decreased understanding can contribute to an agency's lack of proactive management and response to the wellness needs of law enforcement professionals. The Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task forces have prioritized officer wellness through training and support programs. However, many ICAC affiliated agencies do not have the resources or training needed to protect their personnel during these challenging investigations. When leadership does not support addressing mental health issues or understand the nature of child exploitation cases, it can increase the stress level of personnel who work these cases.

Secondary traumatic stress is the trauma someone receives from viewing another person being traumatized. It is also commonly referred to as vicarious trauma. Compassion fatigue, the loss of the ability to empathize because of over-exposure to the content, is another emotion experienced by law enforcement who work these cases.

Although some progress has been made, stigma continues to contribute to the lack of interest among many law enforcement professionals in seeking mental health support and assistance and has perpetuated a culture where help-seeking behavior is viewed negatively. Internalized norms requiring toughness and control in all situations encourage the repression of emotion that would otherwise provide stress reduction.¹⁵ While control is crucial in some aspects of the job, it may discourage professionals from discussing difficult experiences with colleagues and other trusted sources of support.¹⁶ Many investigators and law enforcement professionals understand the need for support, especially when working with child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and heavy

¹⁴ Based on listening sessions conducted with subject matter experts as part of the development of this report.

¹⁵ Powell, M., Cassematis, P., Benson, M., Smallbone, S., & Wortley, R. (2014). Police officers' strategies for coping with the stress of investigating internet child exploitation. *Traumatology: An International Journal*, 20(1), 32–42. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0099378>

¹⁶ Stephens, C., Long, N., & Miller, I. (1997). The impact of trauma and social support on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A study of New Zealand police officers. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 25(4), 303–314.

caseloads, but they are often concerned that expressing mental health needs to supervisors or seeking help from a mental health professional could lead to a transfer to a different specialty area or lead others to question their fitness for the job and could lead to more limited opportunities for promotion, or even termination.¹⁷ Some also worry that confiding in others will negatively impact the person they confide in. Mental health professionals may also not have adequate training to address the unique issues pertaining to law enforcement’s work investigating child exploitation cases.¹⁸ Research shows that law enforcement personnel are reluctant to use Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and affiliated providers due to this perception of inadequate understanding of their work and the lack of trust surrounding confidentiality.¹⁹

Wellness Initiatives at the 2022 National Law Enforcement Training on Child Exploitation

At the 2022 National Law Enforcement Training on Child Exploitation funded by the Department of Justice, there was a dedicated wellness room available throughout the event for the almost 1,400 live attendees. In addition, lecture sessions on wellness included:

- Shielding Your Well-Being: Powerful Tools and Resets for Everyday Living
- Resilient Leadership: Well-Being for You and Your Team
- Allies in the Trenches: Staying Healthy When Immersed in the Ugly
- Keeping the Faith: Spirituality and Mental Wellness
- Vicarious Trauma Training and Mitigation Tools for Judicial Staff

Emotional support canines were also deployed during breaks and were very popular with many attendees.

Investigative Challenges & Workplace Isolation

The number of child exploitation cases being referred for investigation has been increasing exponentially.²⁰ For investigators, challenges with heavy and ever-increasing caseloads may exceed the stress of exposure to the material.²¹ From an organizational perspective, limited resources to hire and train investigators can be extremely challenging and another source of stress. The high volume of cases, insufficient numbers of investigators, and lack of resources to

¹⁷ Cullen, O., Ernst, K. Z., Dawes, N., Binford, W., & Dimitropoulos, G. (2020). “Our Laws Have Not Caught up with the Technology”: Understanding Challenges and Facilitators in Investigating and Prosecuting Child Sexual Abuse Materials in the United States. *Laws*, 9(4), 28. <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws9040028>

¹⁸ Seigfried-Spellar, K. C. (2018). Assessing the Psychological Well-being and Coping Mechanisms of Law Enforcement Investigators vs. Digital Forensic Examiners of Child Pornography Investigations. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 33(3), 215–226. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-017-9248-7>

¹⁹ Cullen, O., Ernst, K. Z., Dawes, N., Binford, W., & Dimitropoulos, G. (2020). “Our Laws Have Not Caught up with the Technology”: Understanding Challenges and Facilitators in Investigating and Prosecuting Child Sexual Abuse Materials in the United States. *Laws*, 9(4), 28. <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws9040028>

²⁰ <https://www.missingkids.org/blog/2021/rise-in-online-enticement-and-other-trends--ncmec-releases-2020->

²¹ Powell, M., Cassematis, P., Benson, M., Smallbone, S., & Wortley, R. (2014). Police officers’ strategies for coping with the stress of investigating internet child exploitation. *Traumatology: An International Journal*, 20(1), 32–42. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0099378>

proactively address cases compounds the stress for individual investigators and teams.²² Furthermore, rapid changes in technology require equipment, training, and expertise for law enforcement agencies to keep pace with technological advancements, all of which require supplemental funding.²³ Funding for ICAC task forces and other child exploitation programs has not increased to meet the overwhelming workload and equipment demands, leaving many teams understaffed and without necessary resources to be fully equipped.

What results for many professionals is stress and trauma in the workplace, exacerbated by isolation associated with investigating and prosecuting child sexual abuse cases. Many investigators spend their days sitting at a computer looking at images or livestreamed videos of child sexual abuse. They grapple constantly with the knowledge that there are children, increasingly younger in age and vulnerability, being violently sexually abused, with little chance of rescue due to limited investigatory resources. This plagues professionals who feel a profound need to combat these crimes. Faced with exploding numbers of tips and cases, many involving young children and infants, investigators may have difficulty limiting the amount of time spent working, increasing their stress and exposure to trauma.

The sensitive nature of the materials involved in exploitation cases may make it harder for personnel on these cases to work with others. Close team connections are a protective factor for trauma. Isolation, on the other hand, can be a compounding factor for stress and burnout and increase the risk of traumatization and long-term negative consequences. Even in a close team environment, isolation can occur. Safeguarding against such isolation is important to reduce stress and trauma.

Officer Safety Concerns

Officer safety is a concern for officers' mental wellness, because physical and mental well-being are inextricably linked.²⁴ While violence against police by sex offenders is not well-studied, in a sample of 1,107 significant incidents where a subject posed a serious threat to officers executing arrest warrants, 11.2% involved a sex offender.²⁵ In those situations, 61.3% threatened law enforcement officers with a weapon or attempted to run them over with a vehicle. Data from the U.S. Marshals Service found that in a 10-year period, 17.4% of the law enforcement officers

Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) VALOR Initiative

The Officer Robert Wilson III Preventing Violence Against Law Enforcement Officers and Ensuring Officer Resilience and Survivability (VALOR) Initiative is an effort to improve the immediate and long-term safety, wellness, and resilience of our nation's law enforcement officers. Through no-cost training, research, and partnerships, the VALOR Initiative seeks to provide resources and skills to confront the many complex issues that officers face and use the latest research and practices to address all aspects of officer safety and wellness.

²² Cullen, O., Ernst, K. Z., Dawes, N., Binford, W., & Dimitropoulos, G. (2020). "Our Laws Have Not Caught up with the Technology": Understanding Challenges and Facilitators in Investigating and Prosecuting Child Sexual Abuse Materials in the United States. *Laws*, 9(4), 28. <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws9040028>

²³ Bursztein, E., Bright, T., Clarke, E., DeLaune, M., Eliff, D. M., Hsu, N., Olson, L., Shehan, J., Thakur, M., & Thomas, K. (2019). Rethinking the Detection of Child Sexual Abuse Imagery on the Internet. *The World Wide Web Conference on -WWW '19*, 2601–2607. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3308558.3313482>

²⁴ Catanese, S. A. (2010). Traumatized by Association: The Risk of Working Sex Crimes. *74*(2), 4.

²⁵ Unpublished data (2004-2016), United States Marshals Service

killed were murdered by sex offenders.²⁶

Officer safety can be at greatest risk during offender apprehension. Child sex offenders, particularly CSAM offenders, may be assessed as low risk for violence because most lack prior arrests for violent crimes; or indeed, *any* crimes.²⁷ However, they dread the thought of going to prison, where they believe they will be targets for violence²⁸ and an arrest may irreparably damage their reputation and carefully created self-image,²⁹ affect or destroy their relationships with friends and family, drain their life's savings, and eliminate their means to earn a living. This level of fear, exposure, and desperation can lead offenders to take drastic measures that put officer safety at risk when faced with apprehension. Any interaction with a suspect carries a multitude of risks for the safety and well-being of law enforcement professionals.

Lack of Training and Resources

Although all law enforcement agencies undoubtedly believe the safety and wellness of their personnel is a priority, competing demands, including investigative efforts, often prevent a stronger focus on funding these wellness programs. Additionally, funding has not adequately increased for hiring and training investigators to work on child exploitation cases given the increase in incoming Cybertips and other investigative leads. As a result, many teams are understaffed and without necessary resources. Organizational challenges and chronic underfunding to meet staffing, training and technology needs, high levels of professional burnout and increased traumatization present ongoing obstacles to many ICAC task force teams. Failure to provide resources for staffing and wellness causes expensive burnout and high turnover, which increases hiring and training needs for new personnel, and increased costs for physical and mental health treatment.

"We have no problem spending thousands of dollars to protect our people physically, but what are we doing to protect our investigators that are viewing thousands of images of child exploitation? It's just as important to include wellness tools that are going to minimize their exposure to this type of material. It is like wearing a Kevlar vest to protect your mental health and wellness"
*Eric Oldenburg, Detective Ret., Arizona ICAC Task Force*³⁰

Limited resources can force personnel to bear increasingly heavy workloads due to the rapid increase in child exploitation cases, the quickly evolving technological landscape, and insufficient numbers of investigators. Faced with an exploding volume of CyberTips³¹ and cases, investigators are exhausted, which increases stress and trauma. Crushing caseloads and the

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Shelton, J., Eakin, J., Muirhead, Y., Owens, J. (2016). Online child sexual exploitation: An investigative analysis of offender characteristics and offending behavior. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 30*, 15-23.

²⁸ Acts of aggression against sex offenders in federal custody is exaggerated in movies and media. When inmates are managed appropriately, violence is very uncommon. For example, out of more than 1,000 inmates who participated in the BOP's Sex Offender Treatment Program between 2000 and 2008, only two participants were ever assaulted, and the perpetrators were other sex offenders.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ Shared during listening sessions for this National Strategy report.

³¹ The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's CyberTipline is the nation's centralized reporting system for the online exploitation of children.

inability for investigators to work anything but the most pressing cases exacerbate that stress, knowing that many children will continue to get abused and will not receive justice.³²

Significant Developments

Despite the challenges, law enforcement professionals are beginning to speak more freely about stress and trauma and how agencies can and should support their employees. For child exploitation investigators and other professionals seeking additional support, the cultural shifts may feel like they are moving at a glacial pace. However, some shifts provide some hope around wellness. For example, ICAC Task Force commanders have recognized the need for wellness support. Since 2009, officer safety and wellness provisions have been put into place through training and technical assistance provided by The Innocent Justice Foundation through the Supporting Heroes in Mental Health Foundational Training (SHIFT) program. This support has provided training to ICAC and law enforcement professionals in every state and has expanded training provisions to affiliated judicial professionals. The SHIFT program has more than doubled the amount of training and technical assistance to the ICAC Task Forces. It has created a resource center that provides training materials, topical resources relating to wellness, and commander resources to assist ICAC Task Forces, their affiliated agencies, and mental health/wellness providers.³³ They have also developed pattern interruption tools to assist with mitigating the effects of exposure to traumatic material and reduce the likelihood of unwanted recall of images. These efforts have led to positive results, including a 2019 ICAC Task Force survey of commanders showing overwhelming support of mandatory wellness programs including one-on-one sessions with mental wellness providers.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children created the Safeguard Program in 1999, becoming one of the first models for protecting and providing support to staff who view objectionable material in the workplace. During the first 6-months of employment, each new analyst participates in monthly individual and group sessions with outside Safeguard consultants, which aids in building trust and ensuring analyst confidentiality. After this period, analysts and managers are required to participate in bi-annual individual sessions and quarterly psychoeducational trainings are offered to all staff.³⁴

³² Cullen, O., Ernst, K. Z., Dawes, N., Binford, W., & Dimitropoulos, G. (2020). "Our Laws Have Not Caught up with the Technology": Understanding Challenges and Facilitators in Investigating and Prosecuting Child Sexual Abuse Materials in the United States. *Laws*, 9(4), 28. <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws9040028>

³³ Password protected resource center available to ICAC Task Force Agencies and affiliates. Access granted with an agency email and verification through <https://shiftwellnessresources.com/register>

³⁴ The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children ,The Safeguard Program, June 22, 2015 Lanae J. Holmes, LICSW, Senior Family Advocacy Specialist, Family Advocacy Division, NCMEC, Duane T. Bowers, LPC, NCMEC Safeguard Consultant https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/imp_ncmec_safeguard_program-508.pdf

“Utilizing the recommendations from SHIFT is crucial to developing a healthy work environment; however, merely providing, and not requiring, mental health services may not be enough. If law enforcement personnel are unwilling, or unaware of the need, to seek mental health services, then it may be the agency’s duty to require mandatory counseling sessions until the climate changes so that seeking mental health services is no longer stigmatized.”³⁵
Dr. Seigfried-Spellar, Purdue University, Department of Computer & Information Technology

Although the creation of programs, materials, and assistance surrounding this issue have increased over the past few years, the need still exists for additional material and curriculum development to support child protection professionals and affiliated agencies. Funding is needed to support development and evaluation of a robust law enforcement wellness programs in child exploitation and beyond.

Strategic Response

Short-Term Goals	Long-Term Goals
<p>Secure Increased Resources: Law enforcement agencies, including federal agencies, should request dedicated resources/funds for mental health and wellness programs as authorized by the PROTECT Act. This should include (but not be limited to) providing funding for law enforcement wellness services and programs to all agencies and staff involved in investigating child exploitation cases via ICAC Task Forces.</p>	<p>Provide Mandatory Training: Congress must mandate psycho-educational training that includes building resilience, psychological first aid, pre-exposure training, imminent danger, and risk identification, and training for leadership within law enforcement agencies to reduce stigma and suicide and improve agency culture associated with seeking mental health support and assistance.</p>
<p>Make Law Enforcement Wellness a Priority: The PROTECT Act should be expanded to require any entity receiving funds under the Act to include budgetary line items for mental health and wellness. Funding should also be increased for the hiring of additional personnel to lessen the burden on each individual investigator, including at the federal level.</p>	<p>Expand access to officer wellness programs within the federal criminal justice system: Officer wellness resources should be readily available for all federal criminal justice personnel to access. Prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, courtroom staff, jurors and others who are exposed to CSAM material should have access to mental health and wellness resources following exposure. This could potentially be embedded within child exploitation prevention-focused units and made available to local partner agencies during investigatory collaborations.</p>

³⁵ Seigfried-Spellar, K. C. (2018). Assessing the Psychological Well-being and Coping Mechanisms of Law Enforcement Investigators vs. Digital Forensic Examiners of Child Pornography Investigations. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 33(3), 215–226. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-017-9248-7>

<p>Wellness Inter-Agency Working Group: An inter-agency working group should be created to address mental health and wellness best practices for those specifically involved in child sexual exploitation cases. The Working Group should collaborate and coordinate with the Department of Justice’s efforts related to the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act to improve information sharing and inter-agency wellness programs.</p>	<p>Partner with Community Leaders: Work with stakeholders to educate the public about the nature and scope of work done by law enforcement and justice professionals and the impact the work has on mental health and wellness.</p>
	<p>Encourage and facilitate research: In order to better understand the impact of child exploitation investigations and prosecutions on law enforcement and prosecutors and identify the most effective wellness strategies and tools, additional research is necessary.</p>

Funding & Mandatory Training

Funding should also be increased for the hiring of additional personnel to lessen the burden on each individual investigator, which will allow for less exposure to the material, less possibility of vicarious trauma and more opportunity for taking steps to safeguard their well-being. Wellness experts agree that training on mental health and wellness is essential to mitigate the effects of trauma exposure during an investigator’s work. Currently, mental health and wellness training in many law enforcement agencies is not adequate. However, both personnel who work on child exploitation cases and leadership need specialized training to improve the well-being of law enforcement in this area.

Biannual mental health and wellness training for all personnel working with CSAM should be mandatory nation-wide once additional funding is secured. These trainings would be a first step in demonstrating that law enforcement well-being is a priority. Investigators across the country have been at the forefront of providing these types of mental health trainings to their teams and affiliates. These trainings have shown great results in employee retention, job satisfaction and reduced signs of burnout and stress.³⁶ However, they are localized, are not mandated, and do not occur as frequently as necessary.

³⁶ Officer Wellness Survey Report, 2019

Psycho-educational training helps individuals cope better when stressful situations arise. This training teaches individuals how to properly identify whether they have a mental health issue, and how to obtain services to address these issues. It not only provides individuals with the self-awareness to identify issues pertaining to mental health or trauma, but it can assist in building skills that enhance a person’s resilience when exposed to traumatic materials. Pre-exposure training refers to training that occurs before an officer is exposed to CSAM. Law enforcement personnel consistently rate pre-exposure training as highly beneficial for preparing them for the possible effects of viewing disturbing materials. Pre-exposure training, in conjunction with wellness programs, leads to better preparedness for the job. It also leads to better long-term job morale, wellness, retention, and emotional health for the officers involved in these cases, their families, and the communities they serve.³⁷ Mandating both psycho-educational and pre-exposure wellness training for all personnel working on child exploitation cases will have positive results for individuals and agencies.

Definitions

Psycho-educational training teaches individuals how to properly identify whether they have a mental health issue, and how to receive mental health services to address these issues.

Pre-exposure training for officers occurs before they begin investigating child exploitation cases and are regularly exposed to child sexual abuse material.

Law enforcement agency leaders and executive staff may not have experience investigating child exploitation offenses. As a result, they often struggle to recognize the signs and symptoms of stress and trauma and may fail to offer wellness support or implement stress mitigation techniques. Because building an effective team and supporting their staff is critical, mental health and wellness training for leadership should be encouraged around attunement, self-care, self-compassion, and strategies for staff support. During a seminar on protecting law enforcement against stress and trauma held in 2020,³⁸ speakers from both law enforcement and the academic community emphasized the importance of providing training and resources to leadership so they can identify the possible signs of trauma and ensure treatment in order to prevent work-related trauma and reduce the risk of suicide in law enforcement personnel.³⁹ These trainings will give leadership the tools to make lasting improvements in the wellness of their teams and the culture of law enforcement.

Make Law Enforcement Wellness a Priority

Wellness must be elevated as a priority within law enforcement agency culture. Leadership is tasked with the enormous responsibility of ensuring cases are completed, personnel are motivated and healthy, and administrative requirements are met. They too should be supported and trained in their own mental health and wellness in conjunction with being given the tools to

³⁷ Building and Sustaining an Officer Wellness Program: Lessons from the San Diego Police Department. (2018)

³⁸ the Research for the Real-World seminar on Protecting Against Stress & Trauma: Research Lessons for Law Enforcement

³⁹ Violanti, J., Stiver, W., & Grupe, D. (2020, January). Key Points About Stress and Wellness for Law Enforcement Leadership | Office of Justice Programs [Interview]. <https://www.ojp.gov/library/abstracts/key-points-about-stress-and-wellness-law-enforcement-leadership>

make lasting, improvements in the mental and physical health of their teams and the culture of law enforcement agencies. It is critical that leadership address and change the perception of mental health and wellness from the top down to erase the stigma around asking for help and affect the culture of toughness and emotional repression common in some police departments.⁴⁰ Lack of organizational support leads to morbidity and mortality rates that are nearly three times higher for law enforcement personnel when compared to the general population.⁴¹

Securing funding and mandating wellness training will ensure that federal agencies charged with preventing and investigating child exploitation are able to better perform their jobs and maintain their own health. A change in culture from the top down will minimize workplace isolation and the tendency for personnel working these types of cases to disregard their stress and vicarious trauma. In the long term, access to mandated wellness training and funding should be made available to all federal agents that are affiliated or partnered during investigatory collaborations.

Wellness Working Group and Community Partnerships

Mental health and wellness programs within law enforcement agencies that are involved in the prevention and interdiction of child exploitation and abuse cases may vary. A “one size fits all” program may not ensure everyone’s needs are met and that improvements towards a healthy and strong team are being made. Creating an interagency working group that meets regularly to share what has worked within their agencies, ask questions, and express needs or concerns will help answer questions and design programs. First, it will provide an opportunity to share what has shown measurable benefits for some teams, providing valuable avenues for federal agencies that do not know where to begin to develop wellness programs. Secondly, the presence and use of social support is a strong protective factor for resilience and mental health and wellness.⁴² Creating a space for leaders in wellness to come together and discuss these topics will benefit agency teams by providing collaborative strategies and will also benefit the individual members of the working group by ensuring they do not feel isolated and unsupported while creating a path to well-being for their teams. The Working Group should collaborate and coordinate with the Department of Justice’s efforts related to the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act to avoid duplication of efforts and improve information sharing and inter-agency wellness programs.

⁴⁰ As expressed during listening sessions conducted with subject matter experts on law enforcement wellness as part of the development of this report.

⁴¹ Mumford, E. A., Taylor, B. G., & Kubu, B. (2015). Law enforcement officer safety and wellness. *Police Quarterly*, 18(2), 111–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098611114559037>

⁴² American Psychological Association (2014). *The Road to Resilience*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association. <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx> and Ozbay F, Fitterling H, Charney D, Southwick S. Social support and resilience to stress across the life span: a neurobiologic framework. *Curr Psychiatry Rep*. 2008 Aug;10(4):304-10. doi: 10.1007/s11920-008-0049-7. PMID: 18627668. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18627668/>