



Vicarious Trauma Among Criminal Justice Professionals: The Facts

Cristal N. Hernandez, M.A.

What is Vicarious Trauma? (VT)

Vicarious trauma was first identified in the 1980s as the “cost of caring.”[1] Currently, it is understood to be “an occupational challenge for people working and volunteering in the fields of victim services, law enforcement, emergency medical services, fire services, and other allied professions, due to their continuous exposure to victims of trauma and violence.”[2] It is sometimes referred to as secondary trauma/traumatization, secondary stress disorder (or secondary traumatic stress), compassion fatigue, and/or insidious trauma.[1,3] Despite the specific term used, this work-related trauma exposure can occur from such experiences as listening to individuals recount their victimizations; hearing about or responding to the aftermath of violence; and responding to mass violence incidents that have resulted in numerous injuries and deaths, among others.[2] Symptoms of secondary trauma can take many forms, but largely parallel those of PTSD, such as re-experiencing, numbness, avoidance, and persistent arousal, and can manifest both in the workplace and at home.[1]

Have You Heard?

- Vicarious Trauma is not the same as “burnout.”[1]
- Being a newer employee and less experienced at their jobs are two factors that may make individuals more vulnerable to this occupational risk.[2]
- Professionals with prior traumatic experiences show significantly higher secondary trauma symptoms than those with no trauma history.[1]

What Are the Consequences?

Due to the nature of their work, criminal justice professionals--including law enforcement, detectives, victim advocates, attorneys, judges, even court reporters--may be more likely to experience VT.[2,3,4] Although each person experiences the effects of VT differently, a change in worldview is considered inevitable.[1,2] For instance, people can either become more cynical/fearful, more appreciative of what they have, or both. Overall, responses to vicarious trauma can be negative, neutral, or positive; change over time; and vary from individual to individual, particularly with prolonged exposure.[2]

How to Support those Impacted by VT?

Educating yourself and spreading awareness are two ways you can help support those impacted by VT. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) has a Toolkit that has a number of resources to help you further understand VT, its prevalence, and its impact on those working in victim services, emergency medical services, fire services, law enforcement, and other allied professions, including specific suggestions for coworkers, supervisors, and family members.

Resources

Texas

- **DFPS Trauma-Informed Care Training --** https://www.dfps.texas.gov/Training/Trauma_Informed_Care/default.asp

National

- **OVC The Vicarious Trauma Toolkit (VTT) --** <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/introduction>
- **Headington Institute --** <https://www.headington-institute.org/blog/resource/understanding-vt-reading-course/>
- **SAMHSA Trauma Training for Criminal Justice Professionals --** <https://www.samhsa.gov/gains-center/trauma-training-criminal-justice-professionals>

References

- [1]Policy Research Associates. (2021). How Being Trauma-Informed Improves Criminal Justice System Responses. <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/bph/wp-content/uploads/sites/161/2021/10/Trauma-Fact-Sheets-October-2021.pdf>
- [2]Office for Victims of Crime. (2024). What is Vicarious Trauma? <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/what-is-vicarious-trauma#:~:text=Vicarious%20trauma%20is%20an%20occupational%20challenge%20for%20people,continuous%20exposure%20to%20victims%20of%20trauma%20and%20violence.>
- [3]Cummings, C., Singer, J., Hisaka, R., & Benuto, L. T. (2021). Compassion satisfaction to combat work-related burnout, vicarious trauma, and secondary traumatic stress. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 36(9-10), NP5304-NP5319.
- [4]Birze, A., Regehr, K., & Regehr, C. (2023). Workplace trauma in a digital age: the impact of video evidence of violent crime on criminal justice professionals. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 38(1-2), 1654-1689.

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Resources

- Aging and Disability Resource Center 855-937-2372
- Cyber Civil Rights Initiative 844-878-2274
- Mothers Against Drunk Driving 877-623-3435
- National Child Abuse Hotline 800-422-4453
- National Domestic Violence Hotline 800-799-7233
- National Human Trafficking Hotline 888-373-7888
- National Sexual Assault Hotline 800-656-4673
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 988
- Texas Abuse Hotline 800-252-5400
- Texas Council on Family Violence <https://tcfv.org/survivor-resources/>
- Texas Association Against Sexual Assault <https://taasa.org/get-help/>
- Victim Connect Resource Center 855-484-2846