

# “To Serve and Protect Their Mental Health”: The Effects of Police Occupational Culture on Police Officers Mental Health

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the connections that lie between the police occupational culture and its impact on officers' mental health - PTSD. The main goal was to determine whether a relationship could be identified with the existing police culture and how it stigmatizes any mention of mental illness. Conducting a qualitative content analysis of government documents as well as a collection of news media articles, the study found connections are in fact prevalent and can thus be casually inferred that police culture impacts officers' mental wellness. The lack of dialogue, and negative features of the police culture prove to be barriers that add additional stressors to an officer living with mental health related issues, such as PTSD.

**Keywords:** Police culture, organisational change, PTSD, policing, traumatic policing, subculture, police occupational culture, stigma, trauma, mental illness.

## INTRODUCTION

Public discussions about policing in Canada have recently and increasingly emphasised issues related to occupational stress, trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (see Cohen, McCormick, & Rich, 2019; Soomro & Yanos, 2019; Violanti & Owens, 2017). Government reports, investigations, academic scholarship, and audits continue to identify problems related to the prevalence and implications of trauma in policing. Police officers are exposed to traumatic events beyond the regular population, and, undoubtedly, this has an effect upon one's ability to conduct their job (Carleton et al., 2018; Rees & Smith, 2007). It can be said that police officers deal with two competing overarching stressors: *occupational stressors* and *organisational stressors* (Soomro & Yanos, 2019). It is this last point, *organisational stressors*, that this paper

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will seek to explore, within the context of PTSD being exacerbated by the police culture. It has been understood (as will be indicated below) that the culture of policing has an impact on whether police officers will seek treatment (Heffren & Hausdorf, 2016). Therefore, it can casually be inferred that if the police culture is unsupportive and laced with negative interactions, the likelihood that a police officer would seek support for PTSD, or other psychosomatic conditions, is less likely to occur. If a police culture is unaccepting and intolerant of a police officers' mental illness - stigma - the police officer is less likely to get the support they need. Thus, through a qualitative approach, via a convenience sample, this paper will explore newspaper publications along with governmental reports to understand the impact police culture has upon officers with PTSD symptoms and/or diagnoses. Only by understanding this connection of the police culture exacerbating PTSD, can policy be implemented to ensure police culture and officer camaraderie supports an environment of mental health.

### **Police Culture**

Police culture can be seen from both a positive and a negative lens. For example, some authors have revealed that police culture is designed to ensure protection and camaraderie (Chan, 1996; Holdaway, 2013; Loftus, 2012; Murphy & McKenna, 2007). Accordingly, police culture can be explained as a practical, even necessary response to the multifaceted and uncertain nature of doing police work (Loftus, 2010, 2012; Skolnick, 1966; Skolnick, 2005). Police culture offers a form of social regulation and authority: an informal guide and informal rules to situational circumstances of police work (Ericson, 1982, as cited in Murphy & McKenna, 2007). It had been identified that police cultures that incorporate the characteristics of supportiveness, teamwork, empathy and perseverance create an accepting social environment for officers experiencing difficulties related to their work (Chan 1996; McCartney & Parent, 2015). For example, some researchers had stipulated that it can serve as a positive function for those officers that experience dangerous situations (Chan 1996; Loftus, 2010, as cited in Coombe, 2013; McCartney & Parent, 2015; Murphy & McKenna, 2007; Waddington, 1999). If the police culture incorporates an environment characterised by

supportiveness, teamwork, empathy, and respect, then it enables personal resilience among officers, supporting their journey with mental illness, PTSD (McCartney & Parent, 2015; Murphy & McKenna, 2007).

On the other hand, some have suggested that police culture can be highly destructive and toxic affecting police officers' ability to conduct their job (Brodeur, 2010; Loftus, 2010; Loftus, 2012; Murphy & McKenna, 2007; Rees & Smith, 2007). This can be seen from literature speaking to the consequential nature of the police culture impacting officer's willingness to seek assistance with their mental health, PTSD; for example, in an insightful passage, Smith (2009) argues, through a qualitative approach, that a negative police culture contributes to the deterioration of officers' mental health. Furthermore, Smith (2009) highlighted how a pattern of taunts and negative remarks directed at officers' courageous enough to speak willingly about their struggles added to their mental turmoil (see Rees & Smith, 2007 for further discussion). Many of these aspects of police culture have been identified as a manifestation of the traumatic cycle an officer experiences (Rees & Smith, 2007; Smith, 2009). Therefore, it is critically important that we identify the connection between police culture and PTSD.

**Defining Police Culture.** The foundation of police studies and police occupation culture began from the work of Jerome Skolnick (1966) who defined the police culture to the many features of police work. He argued that police culture arises from the common dilemmas and pressures that are associated with the job of being a police officer (Skolnick, 1966). He goes on to state that the increased isolation of being a police officer does not offer much in terms of maintaining relationships with others (Skolnick, 1966). This strained relationship between the two, ultimately entrenches the officer within the workplace, and as a result exposes them to the police occupational culture. Later, Skolnick (2005) identified three main areas within the role of policing that form what he termed the *working personality* of a police officer. This *working personality* Skolnick (2005) referred to is a contributing factor to police culture. To highlight this, first there is *exposure to danger* and *violence* causing officers to perceive individuals as *symbolic assailants*: individuals who are perceived, through stereotypical social constructs, and characteristics as being affiliated with

crime, consequently the behaviour of the officer may result in extra vigilance (Skolnick, 1966, p. 266). Skolnick (1966) further added that this perception of *danger* that is experienced is then shaped into *suspicion*, thus, making officers highly suspicious in nature. The second feature of the *working personality* is the *entitlement to authority*: socially constructed by the uniform and badge contributing to officers' suspicious nature and social isolation (Loftus, 2012; Skolnick, 1966). Ultimately, this can lead to the *us vs them* mentality that is seen throughout many explanations of police culture (Skolnick, 1966). The third element that Skolnick (1966) identified is *efficiency*; for example, if an officer is unable to perform under the constant demands and pressures, they often feel isolated. Social isolation is problematic, disconnecting officers from the social world outside the force, therefore, they tend to only engage with those within the occupation (Loftus, 2012; Skolnick, 1966).

To further add to Skolnick's (1966) definition, numerous empirical evaluations were reviewed. Reiner (1992) defined the police culture as the "values, norms, perspectives and craft rules which inform police conduct" (Reiner, 1992 as cited in, Loftus, 2012, p.3). Manning (1989) referred to police culture as "the accepted practices, rules and principles of conduct that are situationally applied and generalized rationales and beliefs" (Manning as cited in Loftus, 2012, p.3); Reviewing Chan's (1996) definition, she revealed police culture "as a set of informal occupational norms and values operating under the rigid hierarchical structure of police organisations" (Chan, 1996 as cited in, Loftus, 2012, p.3). Lastly, Murphy and Mckenna (2007) in their literature review for the *Royal Canadian Mounted Police Task Force on Governance and Cultural Change* also identified police culture as the "set of shared values, group attitudes, agreed upon behavioral norms, informal "craft" rules, and a set of common understandings and informal guides for action (Durivage 1992; Goldsmith 1991; Greene et al. 1994; Skolnick 1994, as cited in, Murphy & Mckenna, 2007, p.5). They also added the danger and authority that comes with being an officer, often makes their world uncertain and full of risk; therefore, resulting in the formation of a "reactionary and protective occupational and organisational culture" (Murphy & Mckenna, 2007, p. 5). What is most common amongst these definitions is that there are a set of values, norms,

and beliefs that arise during their profession that determine police officers' behaviours on and off the job.

**Common Features of Police Culture.** It has been identified by some that police culture is a result of the features of policing (Loftus, 2010; Murphy & McKenna, 2007; Skolnick, 1966). These attributes represent the environment, as well as provide guidelines to an officers' lived experiences on and off the job. However, the features of police culture such as *suspicion, sense of mission, authoritarianism, cynicism, solidarity* and *masculinity* have been scrutinized for their inability to provide open and accepting workplaces in relation to mental illness (Carleton et al., 2018; Holdaway, 2013; Loftus, 2010; Murphy & McKenna, 2007; Rees & Smith, 2007). These features establish a masculine ethos in the workplace, which require officers to portray physical and emotional toughness (Loftus, 2012). An aggressive persona is taken on and officers engage in "masculine" activities, such as heavy drinking after work, and predatory behaviour (Kennedy & Birch, 2018; Waddington, 1999). This can oftentimes be seen as barriers and hurdles when officers are struggling to seek treatment and assistance with PTSD, and other mental health illnesses (Carleton et al., 2018; Holdaway, 2013; Loftus, 2010; Murphy & McKenna, 2007; Rees & Smith, 2007). It has also been noted that officers are fearful to seek assistance due to the barriers created by this toxicity of culture (Rees & Smith, 2007; Smith, 2009).

### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) defines traumatic events that are both direct and indirect forms of trauma exposure (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Direct exposure to a traumatic event is considered as experiencing the event firsthand or being a witness to the traumatic event; whereas indirect exposure is defined as being confronted with trauma, or learning of the unexpected death, serious harm, or injury of persons close to you (May & Wisco, 2015).

**Symptoms.** To receive a PTSD diagnosis, it is said that one must react to a traumatic event with intense fear, horror, or helplessness following the incident (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Pacella, Hruska, & Delahanty, 2013). PTSD can involve a multitude of symptoms

and they are categorised in four clusters: *Re-experiencing*, *Avoidance*, *Numbing* and *Hyperarousal* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Bottalico & Bruni, 2012). Firstly, the individual suffering from PTSD would have spontaneous re-experiences of the traumatic event through intrusive recollections, flashbacks, and nightmares (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2016). Secondly, the individual may emotionally numb the pain and trauma while avoiding certain places and people that can be triggers and reminders of the trauma (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2016). Numbing can be in the form of unhealthy alcohol consumption, feeling detached, having diminished interest or willingness to participate in any activities, and the inability to experience positive emotions (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2016). Lastly, the individual can face increased arousal such as difficulty sleeping, concentrating, feeling on edge, and easily irritated or angered (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2016). The individual can engage in self-destructive or reckless behaviour, become hypervigilant, and have an exaggerated startle response. (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2016). The overall health and wellbeing of persons living with PTSD is diminished and can cause other negative health symptoms such as nausea, constipation, angina, shortness of breath, dizziness, fatigue, headaches, heart disease, and fibromyalgia (Pacella, Hruska, & Delahanty, 2013).

**Direct Exposure.** Direct exposure to at least one traumatic event has been the focus of PTSD in research. It has been examined that experiencing multiple forms of trauma imposes a greater risk of the development of PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; May & Wisco, 2015). A higher cumulative trauma exposure throughout one's life is also associated with the risk of PTSD (May & Wisco, 2015). Not only can experiencing the trauma firsthand lead to PTSD, there is a clear link that directly witnessing trauma occurring to others also has impacts on the development of PTSD (May & Wisco, 2015).

**Secondary Trauma.** PTSD is composed of both direct and indirect exposure to traumatic events. The DSM defines the "repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details" of said event is known as secondary trauma (May & Wisco, 2015, p. 234). Secondary traumatization is the stress

associated when a person experiences a traumatic event indirectly (May & Wisco, 2015). This can be in the form of hearing and or viewing it through narrative accounts (May & Wisco, 2015). Many researchers have found secondary trauma to be most commonly experienced by professionals who provide services to vulnerable and traumatised communities, such as mental health professionals (Bride, 2007; Elwood et al., 2011; Ortlepp & Friedman, 2002; Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995; Schauben & Frazier, 1995; Shoji et al., 2014, as cited in May & Wisco, 2015) telecommunicators (Pierce & Lilly, 2012) medical professionals (Peltzer, Matsek, & Louw, 2014) and police officers (Brady, 2008). This type of traumatic stress can also be referred to as *compassion fatigue* (Figley, 2002, p. 1435) or “*vicarious traumatization*” (McCann & Pearlman, 1990, as cited in May & Wisco, 2015, p. 236). A study conducted by Bride (2007) on effects of secondary trauma faced by those individuals in a work related environment showed that out of the 282 social workers that were studied, 70.2% of them experienced at least one symptom of PTSD in a week (Bride, 2007, p.67). Bride’s (2007) research has shown that professionals who are frequently exposed to secondary trauma may experience PTSD symptoms or distress.

**PTSD and First Responders.** Traumatic situations and events can often be a feature of police work (Carleton et al, 2018; Rees & Smith, 2007; Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2020). The nature of their role to interact with an assortment of personalities, and violent, threatening and horrific situations make operational policing much more inclined and liable to traumatic stress (Carleton et al, 2018; Rees & Smith, 2007). Researchers have argued that at times police officers experience traumatic events, and these events are not handled effectively (Rees & Smith, 2007). The ineffective responses can ‘lock’ officers into a traumatic cycle (Rees & Smith, 2007, p. 272). The lack of response can be attributed to the ‘police culture’ prevalent among many policing organisations (Loftus, 2012). A study conducted by Smith (2009) looked at statements made during his time researching police officers in the UK. He looked for connections between statements made about trauma and police culture. Focusing on sudden death, death of infants, fatal car accidents, victims of crime, firearm matches, and other public disorder incidents, he found that indeed officers are faced with traumatic incidents, and culture does in fact play a role in further traumatization (Rees & Smith, 2007; Smith, 2009). Heavily relying

on one another can benefit officers in many ways; however, Walker (1994) has argued that this cohesiveness has the potential for negatives, and it results in solidarity and insularity (Walker, 1994, as cited in Rees & Smith, 2007). In Smith's (2009) study, the officers had commonly expressed copious amounts of peer pressure, resistance to change and cynicism (Smith, 2009). Interviews with police officers disclosed the difficulties one faced, which would generally lead to emotional black mail, taunts, and remarks from fellow officers (Smith, 2009). The officer also stated that it was dangerous to show any weakness and to be honest. Interviewed officers also revealed change within a policing organisation was either disastrous or met with backlash as officers viewed it to be loads of trash (Rees & Smith, 2007; Smith, 2009). Reaching out is seen as a sign of weakness and incompetence, therefore ignoring these symptoms seems to be their only options, however, doing exactly that is what allows them to fall prey to PTSD (Smith, 2009; Violanti & Hackett, 2003; Waters & Ussery, 2007).

### **Stigma**

Understanding the term stigma, as well as the role it plays with those suffering and dealing with mental illness is paramount. Mental illness has, and continues to be, one of the most stigmatised topics in our society (Byrne, 1997; Byrne, 2000; Chronister, Chou & Liao, 2013; Corrigan & Penn, 1999). As the literature will suggest, persons with mental illnesses (PWMI) face insurmountable challenges and hurdles in their lives, and the addition of stigma only further adds stress (Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Markowitz, 1998). The American Psychological Association (2020) defines stigma as “the negative social attitude attached to a characteristic of an individual that may be regarded as a mental, physical, or social deficiency” (American Psychological Association, 2020). The negative stereotypes attached to these persons can also lead to discriminatory behaviours directed at the individuals (American Psychological Association, 2020). One study, while looking at the impact stigma plays with those living with mental illness, suggests that stigma can be evident in one of two ways: “public stigma” and “self-stigma,” which, respectively, are the reactions of the populations towards PWMI, and secondly, is the prejudice towards oneself, while coping with their mental



illness (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2016; Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Hack, et al., 2019). These forms of stigmas are an additional and oftentimes detrimental barrier to seeking and receiving assistance (Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Hack, et al., 2019; Markowitz, 1998). Link et al. (1997) suggests that the labelling effect on a person living with mental illness is quite strong and has adverse effects (Link et al., 1997; Markowitz, 1998) The negative stereotypes attached to individuals living with mental illnesses become their reality, which then allows the person to feel devalued and expect to be subjected to discrimination (Link et al., 1997; Markowitz, 1998).

**The Effects of Stigma.** The negative effects of stigma are seen to be destructive and harmful (Hack et al., 2019). There is substantial evidence that indicates the relation between the negative stigma faced and its impact of seeking help (Clement et al., 2015). The effects are so harmful, the World Health Organisation, in their World Health Report have stated stigma to be one of the remaining obstacles towards seeking treatment for mental illness (Chronister, Chou & Liao, 2013; Oral, 2007). Effects associated with stigma can, potentially, cause feelings of lower self-esteem, feelings of being misunderstood, depression, reduced help seeking, few social interactions, and an overall lower quality of life (Hack, et al., 2019); (Harris, et al., 1992; Lawrie, 1999; Link et al., 1989, as cited in Chronister, Chou & Liao, 2013; Link, Mirotznik & Cullen, 1991). These negative effects are commonly understood to be detrimental to an already vulnerable person, and thus in turn creates additional stressors for the individual. Discussing the role stigma plays is important, as we can connect how stigma in the workplace, the police culture, impacts those officers suffering in silence.

## METHOD

This project aims to determine the connections between police culture and PTSD by examining contemporary newspaper articles and government reports. The authors chose to analyse newspaper articles as well as reports, as they provided a medium to hear officers' narratives, without structural and organisational barriers. For example, in an article, by Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017), they highlight that a content analysis provides not only a means to contextualise information, but also provides a conduit for

inducing narrative. Social science research has utilised content analysis to deepen arguments, identify themes, and build connections that other methodological approaches cannot illicit (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz 2017; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Furthermore, a qualitative content analysis was used, as it is ideal for textual data and allows for the interpretation and meaning of text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Using this methodology proved superior, as it allowed the classification of large amounts of text into categories that represented similar meanings (Weber, 1990, as cited in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The goal for a content analysis is to help provide “knowledge” and to understand the phenomena being explored in greater detail, through the process of coding and identifying patterns within the literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Reid, Greaves & Kirby, 2017). Thus, it was considered that a content analysis was the most appropriate research method to utilise and to analyse our data.

Newspaper articles and government reports were drawn upon for this research project. We identified that newspaper articles offered us the accessibility to gain fruitful information, and access to interviews conducted with officers, both current and retired, which then allowed the analysis of those narratives and accounts of those conversations. Murdoch et al. (2019) followed a similar methodological approach, for example, they coded newspaper articles as a means to identify attributes within a population. Additionally, government reports provided us official accounts and perspectives of police culture. Drawing on these reports furthered our understanding of police culture being connected to PTSD, such as the impact of masculinity and toxicity as discussed. The inclusion of these government reports signifies that policing organisations acknowledge policing culture can be problematic. Therefore, we concluded these two sources of knowledge are not only empirical validated but offer tone, understanding, and context.

The primary resources for this study were retrieved online, consisting of sources from large news media outlets to smaller ones across Canada. The news media articles were searched and obtained by using key terms to synthesize relevant hits, through the platform *Google*. The initial search terms of “PTSD” and “Police” in “Canada” resulted in media articles all relevant to PTSD and police officers. The next search looked

for the terms “Police”, “Canada”, “PTSD” this also resulted in a large amount of resources – however the selection process to picking the articles looked at the relevance by the date published, and whether the article referenced the keywords searched. The third search used the key terms: “Police” “Canada”, “trauma” and “culture”; this search resulted in a few articles that would prove to be useful. The fourth and final search conducted used the terms “Canada”, “trauma”, “policing” and “culture”. This last search also tailored results to articles relating to police culture and trauma in policing. Having gone through the various articles, 41 news articles were selected to represent the sample of newspaper articles. The secondary and supplemental resources included were government reports and investigations (see Appendix B) that discussed the importance of police culture and PTSD within the workplace. The articles chosen were analysed only for their written content - content such as images, and comments sections were excluded from this analysis. After review of the articles key themes emerged and were subjectively coded for. These major themes that arose from the articles were then used later on for the coding process.

Using a multi-step color coding process specific themes were identified within the articles, such as trauma experienced by officers, stigma faced when receiving help, and police culture cultivating the stigma. For the government documents and reports, a spreadsheet was created outlining the passages referring, directly or indirectly, to police culture. The researchers looked at what the government documents identified as it’s “sources” “features” and “implications”. The researchers also searched for passages that identified the “sources,” “scope,” and “implications” of trauma, and lastly searched for the passages that discussed “reforms,” in regard to policing, trauma, and culture. The findings within the government reports showed that there was a direct link between trauma and culture.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### **Findings from a Review of Government Reports**

From the aggregate data of government reports of policing and police culture, we can see a common theme overtly being discussed that indicates

police culture is a catalyst for trauma (see Rees & Smith, 2007). This theme was apparent from the years of 2007 through 2016. In Murphy & McKenna (2007), they argue that the police culture cultivates a negative work environment, where stigma is present towards officers experiencing difficulties on the job. This relationship, of stigma, making the job more difficult, makes these stigmatised officers hesitate to seek help (Murphy & McKenna, 2007). Moreover, the *Task Force on Governance and Change* identified policing to be stressful, dangerous, and a complex profession, where officers often rely on each other to ensure their safety (Murphy & McKenna, 2007). The police culture has also been described as a culture of “fear and intimidation” (Black et al., 2007). Officers do not speak about topics that may undermine their physical strength, such as mental health, as the culture within policing communities looks down upon weakness (Black et al., 2007). Therefore, speaking out about issues, such as PTSD, is faced with stigma and officers are then deterred from identifying with PTSD (Oliphant, 2016). Thus, inherently, it can casually be deduced that the police culture is a catalyst for trauma, which then prevents officers to seek out assistance.

**“Trauma is the rule rather than the exception”.** The report from the *Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security* had indicated that the unique nature of their work puts police officers at risk for developing PTSD, specifically saying, “trauma is the rule rather than the exception” (Oliphant, 2016, p.3). Perhaps, as police officers internalise themselves representing a profession that embodies strength and mental fortitude, it puts pressure on the officers trying to maintain their reputation and their mental health, through means not in line with the established masculine traits (Loftus, 2012; Oliphant, 2016; Skolnick 1966). For example, the reports such as the final report of the *Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence* and the *Task Force on Governance and Change in the RCMP* have commonly expressed that policing organisations as a whole must undergo a “cultural transformation,” as many systemic barriers exist including a lack of leadership and training (Black et al., 2007; Lang & Dallaire, 2013).

## **Representations of PTSD and Occupational Stress in News Media Articles**

Many of the articles express it's "about time" that we look into the impact of PTSD and police culture (Cowan, 2018<sup>\*</sup>). The Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Brenda Lucki, stated, "we are actually talking about mental health in a loud voice and not a whisper" (Lucki, 2018, as cited in Cowan, 2018, para. 11). The media used the voices of many officers who have faced traumatic events and deal with PTSD to shine a light on how prevalent and important this issue is. The Executive Director of Wounded Warriors Scott Maxwell told CBC "As a nation we're losing, time and time again" (Bartlett, 2017, para. 5<sup>†</sup>). Maxwell also expressed how we are losing "too many of our [police officers] to the invisible injuries of mental health" at a rate too fast (Bartlett, 2017, para. 5).

**"Suck it up, be a man"**. The features of the police culture can make it impossible, at times, for one to reach out for help. The dominant male culture that emphasises "macho problem solving and the denial of distress" (The Conversation, 2017, para. 4<sup>‡</sup>) accompanied with the prevalence of fear or career repercussions, all add to the unlikeliness of an active police officer seeking help (Carleton et al., 2018; Rees & Smith, 2007; The Conversation, 2017). It is apparent in the news media articles reviewed that police officers are reluctant to seek help when it comes to their dealings with PTSD and mental health issues, as there still seems to be stigma surrounding this topic within the occupation (Gollom, 2014<sup>§</sup>). Vince Savoia, the Executive Director of Team Counter Memorial Trust, has said the "old suck it up, be a man" attitude is still very predominant within policing organisations (Gollom, 2014). He further adds that stigma surrounding mental health issues continues to be a barrier for seeking help (Gollom, 2014). Further, Ontario Ombudsman, Andre Marin, adds that the "police culture today treats mental illness as a weakness...officers who

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suffer from workplace stress are told to “suck it up” or are ostracised” (Rash & Casey, 2012, para. 5\*).

**“To Serve and Protect their Mental Health”<sup>†</sup>**. Officers are at a higher risk to commit suicide and experience symptoms of PTSD and depression (Carleton et al., 2018). In a study conducted by University of Regina’s Canadian Institute for Public Safety and Treatment, Director Nick Carleton reported on the rates of suicide committed by first responders. He found that, on average 50 percent of male Mounties are more likely to contemplate suicide due to traumas they’ve experienced on the job (Freeze, 2018<sup>‡</sup>; see Carleton et al., 2018 for a more comprehensive review and analysis). In Freeze (2018), Carleton stated, it is evident that we need to attend to our public safety personnel as they are exposed to a “daily tempo” of “high stress situations”. The witnessing of trauma, such as “desperate dying people” and internalizing it due to the “suck it up” culture takes a toll on first responders (Carleton et al., 2018). Those who do seek help for their work-related traumas are often ostracized and/or thrown under the bus, suggests Violanti (Lorinc, 2016<sup>§</sup>). John Violanti, professor of public health and epidemiology at the University of Buffalo has said there is “institutional pushback, and bullying” directed to those who voice their mental health concerns (Lorinc, 2016). Violanti goes on to say that admitting you have a problem should be the first step to recovery, however many first responders avoid seeking treatment for PTSD, due to the fear of being labelled as “weak or damaged” (Lorinc, 2016).

Being unable to find the support within their organisations due to these factors, officers either deny they have a problem, or suffer in silence until they retire (Lorinc, 2016). Such was the case for Detective Kruger of the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) (see Lorinc, 2016). While on duty as an active police officer, he was forced to take a life (Lorinc, 2016). This resulted in him suffering from anxiety and PTSD for years, until he mustered courage to seek support at the OPP, however was told his meetings would be relayed back to his supervisor, and from that day he

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“shut his mouth, until he retired” all to avoid the stigma and repercussions he would face (Lorinc, 2016). It is events such as these that continue to repress and stifle healthy conversations regarding mental health and PTSD, therefore, further adding to the mental and emotional struggles the officers are already experiencing. This also highlights how the stigma surrounding PTSD faced on the job deters officers’ willingness to seek assistance. Thus, creating additional stressors to an already vulnerable officer.

## DISCUSSION

This paper found the police culture is a detrimental, negative, and impeding factor when officers are wanting to seek help with their mental illness. The features of police culture continue to promote an environment of silence and fear, and, if an officer is brave enough to speak up about their struggles, they are ostracized. Through a content analysis of news media articles and government reports, it was identified that the police culture plays a significant role when officers experience PTSD and try to seek assistance. The media articles, through interviews with officers, indicates that officers were frightened and hesitant to speak about their issues and were continuously struggling in silence. Thus, this paper aimed to discuss that police culture impacts an officers’ mental health relating to PTSD and exacerbating its effects. The culture and stigma surrounding mental health issues, such as PTSD, remain a constant barrier for officers. Thus, we can infer that the existing PTSD symptoms are then further aggravated through the toxic, masculine, and negative police culture (Black et al., 2007). The negative aspects of the police culture continue to manifest a cycle of trauma that officers, who in turn feel the need to suffer in silence than be faced with the negative effects of stigma produced by the culture (Rees & Smith, 2007; Waters & Ussery, 2007).

Policing organisations in recent years are now looking to raise awareness by promoting positive mental health conversations at work, as well as advertising races and fundraisers in support of seeking assistance with PTSD (CTV News, 2018<sup>\*</sup>; Sawachuk, 2018<sup>†</sup>; Stolz, 2018<sup>‡</sup>). However, a change in police culture discourse needs to occur in order to break the

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causational impact of the police culture. This can only be done through a systematic approach, such as police recruitment training, as indicated by Black and colleagues (2007). Top down training must also occur where managers, supervisors, and officers are trained with understanding empathy, sympathy, as well as acceptance. Police organisations must undergo a “cultural transformation” in order for there to be any success and acceptance to change (Lang & Dallaire, 2013). The development of a dependable support system, improved communication skills, and being able to ventilate feelings comfortably would provide officers the opportunity to heal and understand their experiences with PTSD (Waters & Ussery, 2007, p. 184). Waters & Ussery, (2007) identify some necessary changes and additions that would aid in restructuring previous rooted thought and culture towards mental health. Realistic job-related training that indicates trauma is a part of policing (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2020) as well as establishing open communication and conversation between officers and their supervisors is deemed necessary for change (Waters & Ussery, 2007, p.184). The addition of workshops that continue to promote mental wellness, and training for supervisors, as well as all levels of officers, to manage the emergence of those experiencing PTSD, and allowing for opportunities to debrief would also aid in the rehabilitation process (Waters & Ussery, 2007, p.184). Having programs in place that offer peer support can also be beneficial as it can deconstruct the notion that officers must remain emotionally tough with their colleagues (Carleton et al., 2018; Waters & Ussery, 2007). Employing strategies such as these may enable organisations to continue to move towards an open and positive environment that sees the emergence of conversations surrounding the struggles being experienced by officers.

#### CONCLUSION

This study was concerned with the ways that the police occupational culture continues to repress and stifle conversations regarding officers’ mental health, and their ability and willingness to seek help. It examined elements of the police culture, as well as identified and defined the concept of police culture by examining previous explanations. The aim of this paper was to identify the connection between police culture exacerbating effects of PTSD and trauma within the workforce. By way of a content



analysis of news media articles and governmental reports, this study found a connection between the negative effects and features of the police culture stigmatising and ostracising officers dealing with mental health concerns. This in turn, may make them reluctant to seek help further adding to their stress. Only when we understand that some police occupational cultures are toxic and unsupportive environments, can we aim to implement force wide policies and training to educate officers on topics such as stigma intensifying PTSD symptoms.

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## Appendix A

### *Selection of News Media Articles Reviewed*

No.	Search String	Publication/ Author	Date	Title	URL
1	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	The Globe and Mail/ Colin Freeze	February 20th 2018	Paramedics face suicidal thoughts more frequently than other emergency responders, study finds	<a href="https://www.the-globeandmail.com/news/national/paramedics-in-canada-more-likely-to-experience-suicidal-ideation-study-finds/article38045978/">https://www.the-globeandmail.com/news/national/paramedics-in-canada-more-likely-to-experience-suicidal-ideation-study-finds/article38045978/</a>
2	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	The St. Catharines Standard/ Bill Sawchuk	March 16 2018	Scars you can’t see are the deepest	<a href="https://www.stcatharinesstandard.ca/news-story/8331221-scars-you-can-t-see-are-the-deepest/">https://www.stcatharinesstandard.ca/news-story/8331221-scars-you-can-t-see-are-the-deepest/</a>
3	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	CBC/ CBC News	March 16 2018	WorkplaceNL beefs up coverage for people in stressful jobs	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/workplace-nl-workers-compensation-ptsd-rnc-depression-anxiety-1.4580012">http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/workplace-nl-workers-compensation-ptsd-rnc-depression-anxiety-1.4580012</a>

4	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	CTV/ CTV News	February 21 2018	Roasting for a cause: Alberta coffee startup aims to help first responders	<a href="https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/roasting-for-a-cause-alberta-coffee-startup-aims-to-help-first-responders-1.3813971">https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/roasting-for-a-cause-alberta-coffee-startup-aims-to-help-first-responders-1.3813971</a>
5	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	CBC/ Dean Stolz	February 21 2018	Wounded Warriors Run raising money to help those with PTSD	<a href="https://www.cknews.ca/wounded-warriors-run-raising-money-help-ptsd-421426/">https://www.cknews.ca/wounded-warriors-run-raising-money-help-ptsd-421426/</a>
6	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	Regina Leader Post/ Cowan Pamela	March 2nd 2018	Millions in federal funding for post-traumatic stress injury research	<a href="http://leaderpost.com/news/local-news/millions-in-federal-funding-for-post-traumatic-stress-injury-research">http://leaderpost.com/news/local-news/millions-in-federal-funding-for-post-traumatic-stress-injury-research</a>
7	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	CBC/ Brett Ruskin	September 19 2017	Human rights probe launched into police officer's pay cut after PTSD diagnosis	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/halifax-police-officer-ptsd-diagnosis-pay-cut-benefits-human-rights-commission-complaint-1.4283565">http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/halifax-police-officer-ptsd-diagnosis-pay-cut-benefits-human-rights-commission-complaint-1.4283565</a>
8	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	CBC/ Yvonne Colbert	October 4th 2017	He's the 'poster boy' for PTSD, but Halifax police chief is now accused of hypocrisy	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/halifax-police-chief-ptsd-hypocrisy-">http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/halifax-police-chief-ptsd-hypocrisy-</a>

					<a href="#">officers-1.4319292</a>
<b>9</b>	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	CBC/ Alison Crawford	August 30 2017	Researchers find significantly higher rate of mental disorders among first responders	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/police-fire-fighters-ptsd-paramedis-1.4266720">http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/police-fire-fighters-ptsd-paramedis-1.4266720</a>
<b>10</b>	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	Global News/ Phil Heidenreich	Janury 18th 2018	Former Edmonton police officer alleges harassment, lack of help with PTSD while with EPS	<a href="https://globalnews.ca/news/3974849/former-edmonton-police-officer-alleges-harassment-lack-of-help-with-ptsd-while-with-eps/">https://globalnews.ca/news/3974849/former-edmonton-police-officer-alleges-harassment-lack-of-help-with-ptsd-while-with-eps/</a>
<b>11</b>	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	The Leader (Morrisburg)/ The Leader	March 15th 2- 018	Who cares for the Caregivers	<a href="http://www.morrisburgleader.ca/2018/03/15/who-cares-for-the-care-givers/">http://www.morrisburgleader.ca/2018/03/15/who-cares-for-the-care-givers/</a>
<b>12</b>	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	CBC/ Yvonne Colbert	October 12 2017	In-patient PTSD centre needed in Atlantic Canada, advocate says	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/in-patient-ptsd-centre-needed-atlantic-canada-1.4349974">http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/in-patient-ptsd-centre-needed-atlantic-canada-1.4349974</a>

13	"police" "canada" "PTSD"	CBC/ Bartlett	Geoff	September 14 2017	To serve and protect their mental health: The call for more PTSD help for first responders	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/first-responders-ptsd-1.4289095">http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/first-responders-ptsd-1.4289095</a>
14	"police" "canada" "PTSD"	OHS Canada - Magazine/ Cottrill	Jeff	October 17th 2017	Advocate calls for better availability for PTSD treatment for first responders	<a href="https://www.ohs.ca/advocate-calls-better-availability-ptsd-treatment-first-responders/">https://www.ohs.ca/advocate-calls-better-availability-ptsd-treatment-first-responders/</a>
15	"police" "canada" "PTSD"	CBC/ Baker, Dufresne	Rafferty Majula	September 29th 2017	B.C. government to make it easier for 1st responders to make PTSD claims	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/ptsd-presumptive-clause-for-first-responders-1.4312561">http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/ptsd-presumptive-clause-for-first-responders-1.4312561</a>
16	"police" "canada" "PTSD"	Saultstar.com/ Brian Kelly		January 27th 2018	More police will want PTSD help: Keetch	<a href="http://www.saultstar.com/2018/01/27/more-police-will-want-ptsd-help-keetch">http://www.saultstar.com/2018/01/27/more-police-will-want-ptsd-help-keetch</a>
17	"police" "canada" "PTSD"	CBC/ CBC News		March 20th 2017	'Traumatic event' claims quintupled among Ottawa police after PTSD law enacted	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/ptsd-prevention-ottawa-police-1.4032887">http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/ptsd-prevention-ottawa-police-1.4032887</a>

18	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	CBC/ Ariana Kelland	September 27 2017	Journey through post-traumatic stress: A story of 2 officers	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/ptsd-rnc-hmp-kelsey-aboud-dave-odea-1.4305316">http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/ptsd-rnc-hmp-kelsey-aboud-dave-odea-1.4305316</a>
19	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	Toronto Sun/ Terry Davidson	March 12 2017	Many cops shy away from PTSD treatment	<a href="http://torontosun.com/2017/03/12/many-cops-shy-away-from-ptsd-treatment/wcm/60431bb0-5c15-4e9e-a375-b0ca282b44a8">http://torontosun.com/2017/03/12/many-cops-shy-away-from-ptsd-treatment/wcm/60431bb0-5c15-4e9e-a375-b0ca282b44a8</a>
20	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	CBC/ Alison Crawford	October 14 2017	'How many more lives do we have to lose?': MP urges Senate to pass PTSD bill after Mountie's death	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/rcmp-suicide-first-responders-todd-doherty-1.4354280">http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/rcmp-suicide-first-responders-todd-doherty-1.4354280</a>
21	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	Global News/ Maham Abedi	November 26 2017	PTSD, suicide and first responders — A lot of talk, and not much progress	<a href="https://globalnews.ca/news/3874975/first-responders-ptsd-mental-health-progress/">https://globalnews.ca/news/3874975/first-responders-ptsd-mental-health-progress/</a>
22	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	Mississauga News/ Chris Clay	November 16 2017	Higher rates of PTSD in first responders but also afflicts other fields	<a href="https://www.mississauga.com/news-story/7767459-higher-rates-of-ptsd-in-first-responders-but-also-afflicts-other-fields/">https://www.mississauga.com/news-story/7767459-higher-rates-of-ptsd-in-first-responders-but-also-afflicts-other-fields/</a>

23	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	Global News/ Kelly Hayes	October 16h 2017	Cops criticize RCMP for how it handles members with PTSD	<a href="https://globalnews.ca/news/3807048/cops-criticize-rcmp-for-how-it-handles-members-with-ptsd/">https://globalnews.ca/news/3807048/cops-criticize-rcmp-for-how-it-handles-members-with-ptsd/</a>
24	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	The Tyee/ Crawford Killian	August 2 2017	Why Is Canada #1 in PTSD?	<a href="https://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2016/08/02/Canada-PTSD/">https://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2016/08/02/Canada-PTSD/</a>
25	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	CBC/ CBC News	February 23 2017	More than 30 per cent of Vancouver police officers have PTSD, says study	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/police-vancouver-ptsd-kwantlen-1.3997069">http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/police-vancouver-ptsd-kwantlen-1.3997069</a>
26	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	The Globe and Mail/ Colin Freeze	DECEMBER 18 2016	As police gain awareness of PTSD, Mounties see diagnoses doubling	<a href="https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/as-police-gain-awareness-of-ptsd-mounties-see-diagnoses-doubling/article33360812/">https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/as-police-gain-awareness-of-ptsd-mounties-see-diagnoses-doubling/article33360812/</a>
27	“police” “canada” “PTSD”	Global News/ Natasha Pace	February 6 2018	Wounded Warriors Canada investing \$300K to create a national PTSD service dog program	<a href="https://globalnews.ca/news/4009576/wounded-warriors-canada-ptsd-service-dog-program/">https://globalnews.ca/news/4009576/wounded-warriors-canada-ptsd-service-dog-program/</a>

28	"police" "canada" "trauma" "culture"	The Globe and Mail/ Jojn Lorinc	Janusry 15 2016	How do we help the first responders who endure trauma when helping us?	<a href="https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/theyre-there-when-trauma-hits-us-but-whos-there-when-it-hits-them-back/article28217514/">https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/theyre-there-when-trauma-hits-us-but-whos-there-when-it-hits-them-back/article28217514/</a>
29	"police" "canada" "trauma" "culture"	CBC/ Cameron MacLean	December 2 2017	Drunk driving charges against police reveal struggles to deal with trauma, psychologists say	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/winni-peg-police-service-drunk-driving-therapy-counsellors-1.4429753">http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/winni-peg-police-service-drunk-driving-therapy-counsellors-1.4429753</a>
30	"police" "canada" "trauma" "culture"	CBC/ Mark Gollom	September 29th 2017	Why emergency services need a 'culture change' to deal with PTSD	<a href="http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/why-emergency-services-need-a-culture-change-to-deal-with-ptsd-1.2781733">http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/why-emergency-services-need-a-culture-change-to-deal-with-ptsd-1.2781733</a>
31	"police" "canada" "trauma" "culture"	The Star/ Graham Slaughter	Septmeber 8th 2014	Lives of Ontario LGBT cops revealed in new study	<a href="https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/09/08/lives_of_ontario_lgbt_cops_revealed_in_new_study.html">https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/09/08/lives_of_ontario_lgbt_cops_revealed_in_new_study.html</a>

32	"police" "canada" "trauma" "culture"	The Globe and Mail/ Andrea Woo	November 20th 2017	Abbotsford, B.C. police chief praised for mental-health advocacy after deadly shooting	<a href="https://www.the-globeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/abbotsford-bc-police-chief-praised-for-mental-health-advocacy-after-deadly-shooting/article37035929/">https://www.the-globeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/abbotsford-bc-police-chief-praised-for-mental-health-advocacy-after-deadly-shooting/article37035929/</a>
33	"canada" "trauma" "police culture"	The Conversation/ The Conversation	March 2nd 2017	Police officer suicide: it's not just about workplace stress, but culture too	<a href="http://theconversation.com/police-officer-suicide-its-not-just-about-workplace-stress-but-culture-too-76710">http://theconversation.com/police-officer-suicide-its-not-just-about-workplace-stress-but-culture-too-76710</a>
34	"canada" "trauma" "police culture"	The Record/ Liz Monteiro	January 20 2017	Waterloo Regional Police face gender-discrimination suit	<a href="https://www.the-record.com/news-story/7347554-waterloo-regional-police-face-gender-discrimination-suit/">https://www.the-record.com/news-story/7347554-waterloo-regional-police-face-gender-discrimination-suit/</a>
35	"canada" "trauma" "police culture"	Police One/ Troy Kneebone	December 1 2017	The 7 layers of police grief after a line-of-duty death	<a href="https://www.policeone.com/health-fitness/articles/463467006-The-7-layers-of-police-grief-after-a-line-of-duty-death/">https://www.policeone.com/health-fitness/articles/463467006-The-7-layers-of-police-grief-after-a-line-of-duty-death/</a>



36	“canada” “trauma” “police culture”	The Star/ Curtis Rash & Liam Casey	October 5th 2017	How the Ontario Provincial Police deals with officers’ PTSD	<a href="https://www.the-star.com/news/crime/2012/10/05/how-the-ontario-provincial-police-deals-with-officers-ptsd.html">https://www.the-star.com/news/crime/2012/10/05/how-the-ontario-provincial-police-deals-with-officers-ptsd.html</a>
37	“canada” “trauma” “police culture”	Ottawa Citizen/ Robert Sibley	September 29th 2014	The unspoken toll: Police suffering in silence	<a href="http://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/the-unspoken-toll-police-suffering-in-silence">http://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/the-unspoken-toll-police-suffering-in-silence</a>
38	“canada” “trauma” “police culture”	The Hamilton Spectator/ Susan Claremont	January 18 2014	Mental health, police officers and suicide	<a href="https://www.the-spec.com/news-story/4322554-mental-health-police-officers-and-suicide/">https://www.the-spec.com/news-story/4322554-mental-health-police-officers-and-suicide/</a>
39	“canada” “trauma” “police culture”	Global News/ Anna Mehler Paperny and James Armstrong	July 29th 2014	Should we be hiring more compassionate cops?	<a href="https://globalnews.ca/news/1479598/should-we-be-hiring-more-compassionate-cops/">https://globalnews.ca/news/1479598/should-we-be-hiring-more-compassionate-cops/</a>
40	“canada” “trauma” “police culture”	The Star/ Curtis Rash	October 24th 2012	Ombudsman slams OPP and government for lack of action on PTSD among officers	<a href="https://www.the-star.com/news/canada/2012/10/24/ombudsman-slams-opp-and-government-for-lack-of-action-on-ptsd-among-officers.html">https://www.the-star.com/news/canada/2012/10/24/ombudsman-slams-opp-and-government-for-lack-of-action-on-ptsd-among-officers.html</a>

41	“canada” “trauma” “police culture”	Global News/ Kendra Slugoski	March 16th 2015	Unique EPS program helps treat ‘working wounded’ and reintegrate work	<a href="https://globalnews.ca/news/1885489/unique-eps-program-helps-treat-working-wounded-and-bring-them-back-to-work/">https://globalnews.ca/news/1885489/unique-eps-program-helps-treat-working-wounded-and-bring-them-back-to-work/</a>
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## Appendix B

### *Selection of Government Reports*

Title	Organization	Date	Author/s
“Action Plan: The Way Forward. Modernizing Community Safety in Toronto”	Toronto Police Service: Final Report Transformation Task Force	2017	Toronto Police Service
“Healthy Minds, Safe Communities: Supporting our Public Safety Officers through a National Strategy for Operational Stress Injuries”	Canadian Public Safety and National Security: Report of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security	2016	Robert Oliphant
“Rebuilding the Trust”	Royal Canadian Mounted Police: Task Force on Governance and Change in the RCMP.	2007	Linda Black David A. Brown Richard Drouin Norman D. Inkster Larry Murray

“Conduct Becoming: Why the Royal Canadian Mounted Police must Transform its Culture”	Report for the Standing Senate Committee on Canadian National Security and Defense	2013	Hon. Daniel Lang Hon. Roméo A. Dallaire
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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Salehah Hakik** recently graduated and successfully obtained her Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Criminology with Co-op Distinction at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in British Columbia, Canada. Salehah received honourable recognition at the provincial level from the *Association of Cooperative Education and Work Integrated Learning* for her achievements as co-op student of the year. She has extensive experience working with at risk youth and families in her role as a Youth Support Worker. She is actively engaged in social justice, and human rights issues and strives to advocate for and provide voices to the voiceless within the criminal justice system. She aims to continue her passion for advocacy through a career in law as well as pursuing further research opportunities at a graduate level. Salehah can be reached at [salehahhakik33@gmail.com](mailto:salehahhakik33@gmail.com).

**Kory Langlois** obtained his Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Criminology with Distinction at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, in British Columbia Canada. Kory’s interests include examining the Criminal Justice System, mental health, and harm reduction. He continues to be involved in research projects centred around these interests. He seeks to continue his passion for helping those in need with further research at a graduate level, as well as a career in law. Kory can be reached at [kory.langlois@gmail.com](mailto:kory.langlois@gmail.com).