A Trauma-informed Approach to Supporting New Professionals in the Criminal Justice System: A Literature Review

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About Us. Andrew Day and Katherine McLachlan are co-founders of the Magnolia Project (https://magnoliaproject.com.au/), an unincorporated community-based program that delivers projects aligned with trauma-informed and compassionate justice values. In our work, we seek to apply our understanding of trauma-informed approaches to the needs of those receiving criminal justice services and professionals in the workforce. We have worked with SA prisons to provide books for incarcerated parents to gift to their children to mark a special occasion. We have partnered with the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement to publish a guide to support the development of culturally safe practices in South Australian courts.

For more information about the work of the Magnolia Project, please contact admin@magnolia.com.au

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Overview

This report presents a summary of published research relevant to understanding factors contributing to the successful recruitment and retention of new professionals across the criminal justice system. We apply a trauma-informed perspective to consider new worker expectations about their professional roles, the challenges that they might expect to encounter, and what this can mean in terms of personal stress, trauma, burnout, and self-care. It has been written to accompany the Magnolia resource developed specifically to support new professionals' careers, university capstone courses, and criminal justice system employers.

Introduction

This report provides an overview of local and international research that we have identified as relevant to understanding how we best to support those embarking upon or in the early stages of their criminal justice careers.

Whilst we know that many people are drawn to careers in the criminal justice system because of a desire to contribute to the safety and wellbeing of others (see Chu, 2018), we also know that stressful experiences are common in criminal justice workplaces, both across Australia (e.g., EOC, 2016; Worksafe ACT, 2023) and globally (e.g., Forman-Dolan, 2022). A particular focus of this report is on the experiences of new professionals and young women in the sector, given that people in both groups are believed to be at higher risk (e.g., Fusco et al., 2021).

The context for this report is our awareness that criminal justice agencies are currently experiencing considerable challenges in recruiting and retaining staff,

partly due to stress and burnout across all occupational groups (Ko & Menon, 2023; Williams & Sondhi, 2023). In Australia, for example, a survey of over a thousand Victorian police officers described nearly three-quarters as 'burnt out', with two in three reporting that they frequently considered leaving the job (Clarke & McCaffrey, 2023). Similarly, the police minister in South Australia has been quoted as saying that half of the South Australia Police (SAPOL) officers resign in response to stress and burnout (Kemp, 2023).

Consistent with the work of the Magnolia project https://magnoliaproject.com.au/, we have adopted the lens of trauma-informed practice (Harris & Fallot, 2001; SAMHSA, 2014) to understand these concerns and to identify effective responses to the specific challenges that new professionals face. A trauma-informed approach also resonates strongly with the work of many justice agencies that have become aware of the need to attend to the psychological wellbeing of their staff (Bercier & Maynard, 2015).

What follows is an overview of current knowledge that can support the development of trauma-aware organisational practices that can help new professionals to flourish in their chosen careers. We consider, for example, the evidence that stress is associated with poor organisational practices, such as when criminal justice professionals do not feel supported by their employers (Tyson & Charman, 2023), as well as what it means for employees to cope well with the demands of working in a criminal justice setting.

A trauma-informed workplace can serve as a protective factor in someone's life and support a sense of meaning and connection to one's values. Beyond providing a

livelihood, a healthy workplace can also build competence and help team members remain anchored in a shared purpose while providing lifelong connections, collaboration, and community opportunities (CTIPP, 2023, p. 7).

The Significance of Trauma-informed Practice

Trauma-informed practice is a broad philosophy or values that can help improve the quality of criminal justice settings and services. At the most basic level, it is concerned with adopting practices that improve the perceived physical, psychological, and cultural safety of services (SAMHSA, 2014).

Trauma-informed practice has come to be embedded in many criminal justice agencies' organisational, clinical, and corporate governance policies and procedures but remains poorly understood. In this report, it is used to refer to the requirement that organisations and individuals **realise** the presence and relevance of trauma in both their staff and those who receive services and that they **recognise** the signs and symptoms of trauma. They are also expected to **respond** in ways that are informed by knowledge of trauma and that reflect the trauma-informed principles of physical and psychological safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, voice, and choice, and cultural, historical and gender issues (SAMHSA, 2014). Finally, trauma-informed practice involves putting measures in place to **resist re-traumatisation** by minimising those policies and practices

that have the potential to cause further harm.

Trauma-informed organisations will thus work to ensure that:

> *Procedures are in place to support staff with trauma histories and/or those experiencing significant secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma, resulting from exposure to and working with individuals with complex trauma* (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 13).

Efforts to become more trauma-informed are usually supported by standards that require mandatory education, training, and staff orientation about trauma and its effects (Auty et al., 2023; Fallot & Harris, 2011; SafeWork Australia, 2022). Organisations are also expected to develop a strong awareness of how stress and vicarious trauma can arise in the workplace, especially in response to aspects of trauma that may be unique to the specific setting.

Why are Trauma-informed Practices Required in the Criminal Justice System?

For criminal justice professionals, common sources of trauma include witnessing severe injury or death as part of their everyday role, work-related discrimination and dissatisfaction, as well as alienation from the wider community. However, trauma may also arise from exposure to hostility, abuse, and violence from clients of the justice system. Any effort to implement trauma-informed practice must be predicated on an understanding of the intense emotional demands that can be expected to arise from interacting with distressed or traumatised people (Harris & Fallot, 2001).

In fact, repeated exposure to other people's strong emotions is known to increase the risk of burnout and create additional psychological demands on staff. This is sometimes referred to as "emotional labour" (Walsh & Baker, 2022) or the "psychosocial impact" of work and may result in the experience of either direct or indirect (or vicarious) trauma (Clements et al., 2023), especially when there is an expectation that staff maintain professional and empathic relationships with those with whom they work (e.g., Trotter, 2012).

For women and young workers in workplaces characterised by institutionalised and (hyper) masculine cultural norms and practices, particular issues may also arise in relation to exposure to sexual harassment and bullying (Cesaroni et al., 2023).

What is a Trauma-informed Approach to Work Health and Safety?

Trauma-informed approaches are designed to both support workers with existing trauma and ensure that workers do not experience work-related adversity that leads to trauma. Trauma-informed workplaces recognise that employees come to work with different life experiences. Such workplaces support all workers in feeling safe, being consulted and empowered, offering choices where possible, trusting their employers, and recognising the relevance of gender and culture.

A key principle of trauma-informed care and practice is physical and psychological safety—at the core of work health and safety (WHS) principles and practices. Taking a trauma-informed approach to WHS involves:

- Creating a psychologically safe organisational culture,
- Educating workers about trauma to normalise trauma responses, promote an understanding of available support services and an understanding of basic coping skills for self-protection,
- Training management to provide psychologically safe leadership and build trust and collaboration to empower staff,
- Promoting the understanding and practice of self-help strategies to reduce the impact of work-related adversity and pre-existing trauma (Howatt, 2022).

Terminology Relating to the Psychosocial Impacts of Criminal Justice Work

Understanding key terminology is an important first step to implementing trauma-informed practices in the workplace. For example, the terms 'trauma' and 'burnout' each refer to experiences of elevated levels of chronic 'stress'. However, whilst trauma is a broad term that can be used to refer to any life event that negatively impacts a person, burnout focuses attention on the work and workplace experience. What is very clear is that there is an association between workplace stress, trauma reactions, and burnout.

Terms referring to the relationship between employees and their employer organisations

A useful starting part is to reflect on the emotional connections between employees and their workplace and how these influence how an individual reacts to stress or trauma in the workplace. Mackay et al. (2023) have identified three central emotions:

- Employees who feel **gratitude to their organisation** (i.e., they appreciate and recognise the organisation's support, opportunities, and positive contributions to their professional growth and wellbeing) experience greater positive emotion and are more likely to help and support others,
- The term **affective exchange ideology** refers to the reciprocal relationship between employees and their employers. Employees with strong affective exchange ideology believe that when an organisation demonstrates positive behaviours towards the employee, the employee should reciprocate with positive attitudes and behaviours, such as loyalty, pride, and respect, and
- **Pride in membership** in an organisation reflects the sense of honour, satisfaction, and loyalty that employees feel towards their organisation. This relates to the sense of connection to the workplace's values, mission, and overall identity and to the overall commitment and motivation to the work.

These emotions may influence, or be influenced, by attitudes towards the workplace. Employees with positive attitudes and perspectives towards the organisation are more likely to be motivated, committed, proactive, and optimistic about their work and less likely to come to work when they are ill, and they are more likely to go above and beyond their job descriptions; Mackay et al., 2023). Key attitudes include:

- **Organisational commitment:** a deep sense of belonging and positive connection that leads to a willingness to invest in work and support the organisation's goals,
- **Cynicism:** a negative attitude and scepticism that employees may hold towards their organisation or manager. It involves a lack of trust and belief in the organisation's intentions, actions, and decisions, leading to a sense of disillusionment and detachment, and
- **Turnover intention:** an employee's inclination or desire to leave their current job or organisation.

In terms of behaviour, these emotions and attitudes may contribute to behaviours that contribute to an organisation's effectiveness and success, specifically **presenteeism,** when employees are physically present at work but not fully engaged or productive, and **extra-role performance** when employees undertake voluntary actions beyond their formal job requirements.

Mental Health Terminology

Mental health is a state of wellbeing that allows individuals to manage stress, fulfil their responsibilities, work productively, and contribute to their communities.

Stress is a state of worry or mental tension and, therefore, best understood as an individual's response to a difficult situation (WHO, 2024). The stress response helps to prepare the body for a wide range of daily activities and is often considered healthy (known as 'eustress'). However, it can also result in 'distress' when it makes the person uncomfortable (e.g., muscle tension, high heart rate and blood pressure, fatigue), and long-term distress is often harmful. Nonetheless, it is important to note that stress is a natural and common human response that often prompts us to address challenges and threats in a healthy way.

Trauma results from an event, series of events, or circumstances that an individual experiences as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening (NHS Scotland,

2021). It is the individual's experience of an event (a primary trauma) that is important here, and specifically how this negatively affects their ability to cope with or recover and the extent to which it evokes emotions such as fear, hopelessness and a sense of violation (King, 2017). It is possible, and often helpful, to distinguish between acute trauma (time-limited), trauma that is chronic (multiple or ongoing), and complex trauma (a mixture) (Randall & Haskell, 2013).

The term **vicarious traumatisation** was coined specifically to describe the psychological impact of work on professionals who empathically engage with chronic and repeated exposure to traumatic material from their clients (Figley, 1982). This is considered a normal response for everyone who works with traumatised groups. The harmful effects of vicarious trauma may include intrusive imagery, arousal, avoidance behaviours, and negative changes to cognition that are commonly associated with primary trauma (Aparicio et al., 2013) but are evident when a person becomes tense and absorbed with the traumatic stories/experiences described by those they work with. This can result in the professional having trouble talking about their feelings and/or worrying that they are not doing enough for their clients. More broadly, it can manifest in a diminished interest in doing things that they enjoyed previously, diminished feelings of satisfaction/ personal accomplishment, low motivation, blaming others, feelings of hopelessness associated with work and/or client, changes in appetite, hypervigilance, depression, anxiety, suspiciousness, anger/ irritability, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and isolation (Bisson et al., 2015).

The terms **compassion fatigue** and **secondary traumatic stress** are also used to describe aspects of vicarious trauma that might also be described as the 'costs of caring' (Rauvola et al., 2019). Both terms refer to a state of physical or psychological distress that arises after exposure to the traumatic experiences of others. The symptoms of secondary traumatic stress resemble those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and include intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and physiological arousal. However, vicarious trauma is gradual and defined mainly in terms of cognitive phenomenon. Secondary traumatic stress is more acute and focuses on experiences linked more directly to symptoms of PTSD (Jiminez et al., 2021), triggered when individuals feel that the trauma of those whom they are helping is happening to them or their loved ones.

The more general term, compassion fatigue, is used to understand the physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion that arises from prolonged exposure to other people's distress. It occurs when professionals experience symptoms of trauma themselves after being repeatedly exposed to the traumatic experiences of their clients (McMackin et al., 2023).

Burnout is another important term. It is best understood as the product of a poor working environment and high levels of chronic occupational stress. Researchers have tended to define burnout using various terms, such as emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and detachment from the job (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Emotional exhaustion is the sense of feeling drained, while de-personalisation links more closely to cynicism and the view of people at work as a source of problems.

Burnout is now an official diagnosis in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases. It has become one of the most studied phenomena in organisational settings, with evidence accumulating, for example, that the correctional environment produces high levels of burnout in its officers and is associated with decisions to leave the corrections industry (Forman-Dolan et al., 2022).

Organisational Climate Terminology

A range of terminology is also used to describe the **organisational climate** or the perception of the working environment and the overall culture of an organisation. This can play a crucial role in mitigating the demands of highly stressful work and buffering against distress from traumatic incidents. Mackay et al. (2023), for example, have identified the following as important:

- **Perceived organisational support**: how much an employee believes their organisation values their contributions and cares about their wellbeing. Support from supervisors and managers is also important,
- **Psychological safety:** the feeling of safety to express ideas, take risks, and ask questions without fear of reprisal in the workplace,
- **Perceptions of organisational performance:** the views, attitudes, and opinions that employees have about their organisation's ability to achieve its objectives,
- **Organisational accountability**: the responsibility of an organisation to take ownership of its actions and willingness to address mistakes or wrongdoing, and
- **Organisational competence:** the perception of an organisation's ability to carry out its role effectively.

Literature Review

Aims

This review presents an overview of research, both Australian and international, that speaks to the following three questions:

1. What are the characteristics of a trauma-informed employer?
2. What do we know about the experience of trauma in criminal justice professionals?
3. What are some potential ways to reduce stress and burnout?

Methodology

This research was based on a narrative review methodology rather than a systematic review (the latter using a prespecified method to synthesise findings from similar studies to answer a narrow question in a specific context). A narrative review is considered most suitable when the aim is to curate a diverse body of literature and to provide an overall summary of knowledge (see Sukhera, 2022), such as in this case where we wanted to curate research most relevant to criminal justice professional practice. Accordingly, what follows is not based on applying strict, predetermined inclusion or exclusion criteria. Rather, the boundaries and scope of the review were defined *a priori* by our understanding of the relevance of trauma and trauma-informed practice.

Relevant research was identified from a search of the ProQuest (Question 1) and EBSCO (Questions 2 and 3) research databases using relevant search terms relating to the setting (e.g., police, prisons, corrections), workplace trauma (e.g., stress, trauma, burnout), and self-care (e.g., wellbeing, support). Only

English-language articles published in the last 15 years were considered, given that trauma-informed practice has only gained prominence in the last decade.

To answer the first question about the characteristics of a trauma-informed employer, literature that focused on the operationalisation of trauma-informed practice for the care of staff (rather than for clients) was sought and collated. To answer the questions about trauma and reducing burnout in staff, information was curated that distinguished between key characteristics related to stress and trauma in the workplace and then specific studies relating to known triggers in criminal justice professions. Finally, those studies that considered ways of responding to stress and coping in these settings were reviewed.

Findings

Q1: What are the Characteristics of a Trauma-informed Employer?

Workforce Development and Training

In general terms, a trauma-informed employer is an organisation that realises the importance of adversity, stress, and trauma on the health of its workforce and recognises the value of embedding strategies and responses to manage or mitigate the impact of trauma on workers. A trauma-informed employer will aspire to ensure that everyone in the organisation recognises the potential for psychosocial harm in the workplace and acknowledges the adversity that can be present in the personal lives of workers (Choltz & Wagner, n.d.).

Focus on Staff Wellbeing and Therapeutic Support

Adversity and psychosocial stressors can take a toll on the physical and mental health of workers and affect their ability to do their jobs. Trauma-informed employers ensure that everyone knows how to identify the early signs of psychosocial harm, know the services and support available to help workers, and know how to access these services. This relates to the provision of peer support and supervision processes, which are often identified as key to the wellbeing of staff who work in forensic settings (e.g., Davies & Jones, 2024).

Safe Spaces

A trauma-informed employer will ensure the physical workplace is warm, welcoming, and soundproof. This is considered equally important for both workers and the clients they support (Cogan et al., 2023).

Regular Organisational Health Checks

A workplace health assessment is a process of gathering information about those factors that support and/or hinder the health of employees and identifying potential opportunities to improve or to address them (CDC, 2015). This reflective and responsive organisational practice may be known by other names but is commonplace in trauma-informed organisations.

Employers can do a better job helping their employees understand that employee assistance programs are private, confidential, and accessible through technology. However, because assistance programs are usually run by third-party providers, employers may avoid direct attempts to discuss toxic stress, trauma, and

mental health issues among their staff, leaving it up to workers to figure out what's wrong and get help. Unfortunately, not enough of them do, especially because so few people even understand toxic stress, trauma, and their effects. This impacts the workplace as much as the individual (Choltz & Wagner, n.d., p 6).

Q2: What Do We Know About the Experiences of Trauma in Criminal Justice Professionals?

Few workplaces present as many personal and professional challenges as those in the criminal justice system. For example, those who work with the victims of crime may be deeply affected by the stories they hear. Others may fear for their personal safety, encounter vulnerable and traumatised people daily, and may sometimes witness graphic materials and events. Lucre et al. (2022) have further noted that forensic professionals will often be exposed to behaviour or accounts of behaviour that cause harm to others, as well as also being at risk of direct harm themselves (including threats or actual sexual violence). They make the point that "whilst there may have been a sense historically that such experiences are 'just part of the job'"(p. 204), criminal justice services are now increasingly aware that staff may be directly or vicariously traumatised whilst undertaking core aspects of their role. McLachlan (2024) has written about these experiences in the following occupational groups:

Police Officers

Police roles are diverse, with officers often the first responders at fatalities, regularly exposed to victims of domestic, sexual and child abuse, and facing the risk of injury or potential harm themselves.

Dealing with death can be particularly challenging for officers when the victim is a child, when the circumstances are horrific, or when the officer must deliver the news to the family. Police can also expect to be exposed to adversity in the form of assaults or threats of assaults. Some of the more challenging work experiences relate to child and family abuse, shift work and internal policies and practices perceived to be non-supportive. Policing organisations may themselves cause traumatic responses through the paramilitary, hypermasculine culture that is often present (see also Foley et al., 2022).

Correctional Service Workers

Like police officers, prison officers may also be exposed to stressful situations, including violence between prisoners, prisoner deaths, challenging interactions with prisoners, prisoner self-harm and suicidal behaviours, and violence and interpersonal harm directed at staff. Community corrections workers may also be exposed to threats of personal harm or the adversity of others, as well as organisational factors that lead to stress, such as high workloads and limited autonomy.

Legal Practitioners

Lawyers are not traditionally trained to recognise the pre-cursors or to acknowledge the risk of psychosocial harm or vicarious trauma. Law and legal practice promote silence around mental health and wellbeing, with the culture of the legal profession sometimes enabling and condoning sexual and gender harassment as well as bullying (Nickson & Neikirk, 2024).

The Mental Health Consequences of Trauma

The experience of direct or vicarious trauma in criminal justice professionals can result in chronic fatigue, isolation, and withdrawal from family and friends, as well as the experience of secondary traumatic stress and burnout. For example, Rich (1997) reported that nearly two in three (62%) of professionals who worked with people convicted of sexual offences experienced symptoms of secondary traumatic stress (e.g., flashbacks, sleep disturbance, intrusive images). Elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and isolation were also identified, with respondents reporting that they viewed the world as less predictable.

The impacts of secondary traumatic stress on police officers have also been discussed by Conn and Butterfield (2013). Their review noted the effects on both mental and physical health issues and behaviour (e.g., absenteeism, domestic violence, excessive use of force, substance abuse). Importantly, they also noted that the impact of trauma experienced in policing may affect the family of the officer and be long-term.

The correctional literature is also awash with studies that seek to identify the causes of correctional officer job burnout (e.g., Lambert et al., 2010a, 2010b). These include job dimensions such as organisational variables and a lack of social support at work, but what is also apparent here is how burnout significantly negatively affects life satisfaction, with those who report feeling less satisfied outside of work also more likely to indicate feelings of burnout in the workplace.

Factors Known to Lead to Stress, Trauma, and Burnout

Given the array of factors associated with occupational stress, vicarious trauma, and burnout, it is possible to identify triggers common to criminal justice settings. Some relate primarily to the workplace (organisational factors), and others to the individual employee (job performance factors).

Organisational Factors

A range of organisational factors, such as input into decision-making, poor communication, a lack of administrative support, and organisational fairness, have been shown to lead to burnout among correctional staff. A lack of social support, particularly in terms of supervisory support, management support, and co-worker support, is also thought to increase burnout (Lambert et al., 2010), as well as other job characteristics, such as a lack of variety, feedback, and autonomy in the work itself (Griffin et al., 2012).

The WHO Organisational Stress-related Hazard Categorisation (Leka et al., 2004) has been used to identify different types of stressors that arise at the organisational or institutional level for police officers. For example, Purba and Demou (2019) report evidence (of varying quality) that the organisational stressors most closely associated with reduced wellbeing are a lack of support from colleagues, supervisors, and the organisation, bullying and teasing, job demands and pressures, and long working hours. These findings are summarised next.

Workload, Work Pace, and Working Hours. There is some evidence that 'job pressure' is a significant predictor of anxiety and a poor sense of personal accomplishment, with long working hours associated with psychological distress.

Interpersonal Relationships. A lack of support from superiors and organisation

was identified in some studies as an important occupational stressor, as was exposure to what they called 'language harassment'. There is also evidence that stress is a consequence of ethnic or racial bias (and helping co-workers to deal with prejudice), as well as from sexual harassment.

Participation and Control. A limited ability to make decisions is linked to emotional exhaustion in both female (and male police officers, as was a 'lack of influence' over how policing is conducted.

Job Performance

Job performance stressors relate to the experience of stress in the workplace and include both direct and indirect threats to the employee's safety.

Bullying and Sexual Harassment. People who work in corrective services have been reported to experience high levels of psychosocial harm associated with corruption, poor prison practices, moral injury, bullying and intimidation (IBAC, 2021). In Australia, a review of one police agency found that approximately 45 per cent (n=740) of employees had experienced sex discrimination (i.e., were treated unfavourably because of their gender—including, but not limited to, sexual harassment and sexual assault), with most being female (63%) and/or identifying as LGBTQIA+ (59%) (the Equal Opportunity Commission [EOC], 2016). Most people did not report the discrimination, and when they did, they faced "victimisation, including being ostracised, ignored, bullied, or denied training and promotions" (p. xvii). This was subsequently confirmed when the police commissioner acknowledged the need to understand "what it is about SAPOL's culture, values and practices that have been keeping women away or having them leave—and, most critically,

how willing it is to change these things" (pp. ix-x).

The prevalence of sexual harassment and gender discrimination for women working in the criminal justice system is also reflected across international studies (Helfgott et al., 2018). In fact, some of the most significant concerns for women who work in the justice system relate to exposure to sexual harassment. In one US case, the Department of Corrections agreed to settle a class action in response to allegations of rampant sexual harassment, often by male supervisors, that included unwanted touching, sexual propositions and lewd comments, and retaliatory behaviour against those who resisted (see Daly et al., 2023).

Personal Safety. Another key concern is exposure to workplace violence, a broader term that is used to describe physical assaults, sexual assaults, sexual or racial harassment and gendered violence (WorkSafe ACT, 2023). This has been identified as contributing to the perception that the criminal justice sector is an unsafe workplace and is one reason some professional groups may be reluctant to work in these settings (Morris & West, 2020). For example, one study of psychology graduate students reported that nearly three-quarters (71%) either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement that safety was an important aspect of their willingness to work in a forensic or correctional setting. Such fears do not appear to be unfounded, with correctional facilities regularly reporting some of the highest rates of occupational injury and illness. At the same time, however, safety risks are also present in other workplaces, such as in acute mental health wards where the reported rates of assault on staff are high. There is also evidence that clinicians feel safer working in correctional institutions than in other healthcare settings, given the numerous

safeguards that are in place to protect them.

Exposure to Distress. New professionals may expect to encounter high levels of psychological distress among justice-involved people. This might be attributable to the nature and duration of confinement, the emotional challenges justice-involved people face, the psychological tolls of physical and social isolation, and/or the exposure to—or fear of—traumatic events, among many other environmental, social, or biological factors.

Hostility to Clients. There is evidence of staff developing negative attitudes towards those they work with. For example, Bowers (2005) has reported that forensic mental health patients with a diagnosis of 'personality disorder' are generally not popular or well-liked by psychiatric professionals, with treatment-associated pessimism, rejection, and even hostility. Some staff have been reported to judge such patients as less deserving of care (see Lewis & Appleby, 1988), although the extent to which this relates to pre-existing attitudes or cynicism (a component of burnout) is unclear. It has also been reported that the 'spillover' from work into the home can impact wellbeing (e.g., becoming bitter, jaded, angry, authoritarian) and changes to self-identity.

Role Conflict. Some staff may also face role ambiguity and conflict. On the one hand, they are expected to maintain control and yet also expected to fulfil a human services role (see McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2023).

Witnessing Trauma. Correctional staff can also expect to witness traumatic events including, but not limited to, suicides and interpersonal conflicts between incarcerated persons, including homicide (Logan, 2024). Police officers may also be expected to view traumatic

material as part of criminal investigations (Duran & Woodhams, 2022).

Moral injury refers to the harms caused by perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts at work that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations (Morris, 2024).

Q3. What are Some Potential Ways to Reduce Stress and Burnout?

A large body of research now considers the beneficial impacts of a range of organisational and self-care strategies for those experiencing stress in the workplace. For example, Conn and Butterfield (2013) have identified several ways that police officers might cope successfully with stress. These include self-care, family/significant other support, talking with co-workers, emotional engagement, work environment, mental health resources, personality, ability to help the victim, relatability to the victim, scene reminders, continuous exposure/ dwelling, exposure to human nature, vulnerability of the victim, and presence of additional stressors.

Self-care, as well as organisational change, is important to preventing stress and burnout. This will inevitably involve applying the trauma-informed practices of realising the presence and relevance of trauma (through self-monitoring of stress), recognising the signs and symptoms of trauma, responding in a way that promotes physical and psychological safety, trustworthiness and transparency, accessing peer support, and **resisting re-traumatisation** by avoiding further harm.

Whilst much of the available advice relates to things that the individual might do to cope with the stresses of work, it is

important to note—from a trauma-informed perspective—that implementing broader practices and policies to protect physical and psychological safety is most important. For example, staff support and wellbeing initiatives are often provided in the context of widespread burnout, staffing shortages, and organisational change.

Organisational Factors

Efforts to implement trauma-specific practices without first implementing trauma-informed organisational culture change are unlikely to be successful. According to Menschner and Maul (2016), the key ingredients for successful trauma-informed care include leading (and communicating about) the importance of moving towards a trauma-informed approach (see also Butcher et al., 2024), engaging those in receipt of services in organisational planning, training for all staff (operational and civilian) (see also Day et al., 2023), creating a safe environment, preventing secondary traumatic stress, and hiring a trauma-informed workforce.

Legal Responsibilities. Kontra (2024) has recently noted that workplaces are legally responsible for supporting employees' wellbeing. This follows the High Court decision in *Kozarov v Victoria* (2022) 273 CLR 115 which establishes that employers in Australia are expected to develop policies and procedures to properly create safe workplaces, protect employees, and offer wellbeing training to all employees.

Creating Positive Work Environments. Physical environments that create an atmosphere that respects the need for safety, respect, and acceptance have been identified as important. Jewkes et al. (2019), for example, describe a 'welcoming

environment' that affords personal space (for comfort and privacy), the absence of exposure to violent/sexual material, and sufficient staffing to monitor any potentially traumatising behaviour of others. There may be opportunities for staff to enhance the environment they practice in ways that make it more welcoming.

Staff Support Groups. The wider literature on organisational stress shows that high levels of social support from colleagues and supervisors at work are often protective of mental health (Garbarino et al., 2013). Lucre et al. (2022) have further distinguished the provision of staff support from various other practices, including supervision and reflective practice groups. The aim of offering staff support is generally to improve the quality of work (e.g., line management and supervision), develop an action plan, or focus on understanding the trauma dynamics that arise in the work.

Individual Factors

A Sense of Purpose and Meaning. Many professionals have a strong sense of purpose in their work. For example, those who work with people with trauma often report that they have a 'calling' or 'vocation' to do the work. Coleman et al. (2021) have also reported that these clinicians "spoke of how they felt that they had expanded, grown, and developed through this work. Some described this work as giving their life meaning and developing a sense of fulfilment as a result" (p. 2802). Similarly, Australian research with 50 police officers found that the "sense of duty encourages them to adopt measures that contribute to their long-term wellbeing, personal and professional growth" (Paterson, 2021, p. 12).

International research identifies similar themes. In the US, for example, it has been reported that the most important reasons for joining the police are to 'serve and protect', to help people in the community, and to fight crime.

> They do not feel that being female is an obstacle that cannot be overcome through hard work and persistence, and careful navigations and awareness of the challenges women face in a male-dominated work environment despite challenges related to gender (Helfgott et al., 2018, p. 254).

New female officers rated 'helping people' and 'serving and protecting as significantly more important than males—a finding consistent with a larger body of evidence that women generally seek out vocational opportunities to help others. Women and officers of colour also rate 'legacy' motives (the desire to affect future generations, to be a role model for others, and to show that 'people like me' make good officers) as more important than for both men and white officers.

Negative expectations about joining the police were also identified. For both men and women, these included concerns about being able to 'prove oneself', 'do the job effectively', the danger of the job, and the stressful nature of the work. Overall, though, it was women who reported stronger concerns in each of these areas, with the largest differences concerning the physical nature of the job, being taken seriously, and facing discrimination in the workplace.

Despite the acknowledgement that gender discrimination is present in many jobs in the criminal justice system, women often remain confident and optimistic about having meaningful and successful careers and their capacity to manage the likely challenges (Helfgott et al., 2018).

Positive Attitudes towards Justice-involved People. Staff with a positive attitude are likely to experience lower stress levels, a greater sense of personal wellbeing, and a more positive perception and relationship with those they work with and for, as well as their line managers (Lucre et al., 2022). They are thought to interact more with clients, be less likely to be involved in conflicts and perform better at work.

Bowers (2005) identified several features of an organisation as relevant to the development of a positive attitude in forensic mental health nurses (e.g., the operations of the complaints system, multidisciplinary relationships, and management methods), with individual professional factors also important (e.g., beliefs about the cause of personality disorder; psychological understanding; moral commitments to equality and universal humanity); and self-management methods to contain emotional reactions (e.g., appeal to a higher morality, such as professional identity; reminding oneself of a person's abuse history; separating the behaviour from the person; and the use of clinical supervision). Responding to feelings such as puzzlement, frustration, irritation, fear, and being manipulated that arise naturally when faced with extreme behaviours without blaming the person is particularly important (Cooke et al., 2019).

Public Misconceptions. Negative stereotypes about community attitudes about the nature of criminal justice work, which largely see staff as engaging in dehumanising or abusive practices, are often incorrect. It has been suggested that it is helpful for professionals to remind themselves that community members do generally view criminal

justice professionals in a reasonably positive light (Sundt, 2009).

Moving On. Some graduates in disciplines relevant to criminal justice may simply choose not to work with justice-involved people. There may be various reasons, including stigma and personal experiences with crime, concerns about the ability to work effectively, or how to balance loyalties to their clients with those to the community. For others, a reluctance may be based on the (perception of) poorer pay, working conditions, and professional opportunities.

Discussion

What emerges from this review is a large but generally coherent body of research that attests to the challenges that often face criminal justice professionals. There is consistent evidence that the risks of stress, trauma, and burnout are not only real but common for many of those who work in these settings.

To respond to this, there is a need to implement a wide range of measures that support staff wellbeing, including those that are:

- Universal (available to everyone),
- Targeted (for those at risk of psychosocial harms), and
- Selective (for those who are already experiencing difficulties).

Several strategies to support staff wellbeing have been described, although limited evidence shows that workplace interventions successfully support young workers' work environment, safety and health. A recent systematic review by Sunstrop et al. (2024) concluded that currently, "there is not enough evidence from the scientific literature to guide current practices" (p.1). This includes

workplace strategies to support the mental health of employees, with this review identifying no consistent positive benefits of initiatives such as mindfulness training or mindfulness in combination with meditation or yoga, mental health education and information provision, and individual psychological therapies on young employees, despite other reviews reporting positive effects on burnout and stress reduction (Waddell et al., 2023).

This speaks to the importance of recognising that a trauma-informed approach extends far beyond the provision of employee assistance and wellbeing programs such that a range of different initiatives and programs are put in place as documented in resources, such as the *Trauma-Informed Organisational Toolkit* launched by National Legal Aid (Maylea et al., 2023), and the Minds Count (2023) *Guidelines for Psychological Wellbeing in the Legal Profession*.

For Kontra (2024) though, the inescapable conclusion to be drawn here is that exposure to trauma and workplace stress is not simply 'part of the job' but preventable when a trauma-informed approach is applied across an organisation.

From a trauma-informed perspective, there is much work to be done to ensure that those people receiving criminal justice services feel safe, respected, and supported in the service environment, and even more to ensure that new staff experience these feelings. Relatively little of the existing research speaks directly to the issues commonly facing women and young workers new to criminal justice workplaces. It is also important to note that despite any commitment to implementing trauma-informed principles (and even training in trauma-informed care, self-care, etc), many organisations

will fail to enact these principles in everyday practice (Rich & Garza, 2021).

It is instructive to reflect on the extent to which new professionals can best be supported to feel safe in the workplace, trust their employers, feel empowered, work in a supportive and collaborative environment, and recognise the impacts of diversity. Of course, these are the core principles of trauma-informed practice and apply equally to the delivery of criminal justice services to clients and to those who provide them.

In circumstances with a lack of safety or trust in the workplace, or even 'institutional betrayal' (i.e., when the employer intentionally or inadvertently mistreats an employee, Manning, 2022), the risks of psychosocial harm are high. As a result, trauma-informed organisations can be expected to operationalise the principles of practice to focus on the following:

- Acknowledgement (new staff know they will be heard),
- Support (new staff know they can get the help they need), and
- Trust (new staff know they will be treated fairly).

On an individual level, the personal ability to manage stress effectively, cope with vicarious trauma, and avoid burnout is also important to have a productive and satisfying career in the criminal justice system.

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