



Building Workforce Resiliency

Improving the mental and
emotional resilience in justice
system professionals

Introduction

For many justice system professionals, from police officers to corrections personnel, profound stress is a constant part of their work. As a result, they are vulnerable to a variety of conditions, like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and even suicide. In fact, law enforcement officers and firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty.¹ An estimated 15% of male and 18% of female law enforcement officers develop PTSD compared to 1.3% to 5.5% of the general population.² And nearly twice as many police officers (12%) experience symptoms associated with depression than the general population (6.8%).³

These stressors affect on-the-job performance, as well. For example, in general, depression interferes with a person's ability to complete physical job tasks 20% of the time and reduces cognitive performance 35% of the time.⁴ What's more, these challenges ultimately impact not just justice officers, but also their families, whose lives may also be affected as a result.

While much of the following analysis draws on US experience, the research and insights discussed below have application across many operational justice agencies.

The importance of resilience

Simultaneously, a reluctance to seek help persists among many justice system professionals, in part, driven by the fear of being perceived as weak or incapable. Which is why justice systems are working to protect the well-being and mental health of those conducting the work within them. With that in mind, agencies are confronted with an imperative: to transform their cultures by challenging mental health stigmas and fostering supportive environments that encourage justice system professionals to seek—and receive—the help they need.

Key to that effort is prioritizing and nurturing the long-term resilience of these professionals. A core component of overall well-being, resilience serves as a linchpin in the justice system's pursuit of an engaged and effective workforce. Defined as the capacity to adapt, bounce back, and flourish in the face of adversity,⁵ resilience empowers individuals to cope with and navigate the challenges inherent to their roles within the justice system. Resilience also enhances engagement, mitigates the risk of burnout, and enables effective fulfillment of operational demands.

This paper examines resilience, as well as suicide prevention, as related to justice system professionals. It examines the stressors faced by different justice professions and offers effective strategies, evidence-based interventions, and leading practices to enhance resilience, mitigate suicide risk, and foster positive mental health and well-being.

Challenges faced by different justice professions

Each step of the justice system encompasses a wide array of professionals who experience high levels of stress that impact their resilience and mental health. Law enforcement officers (LEOs)—specifically, police officers—respond to emergency calls and apprehend people accused of crimes, among other duties, while federal agents conduct surveillance, investigate crime scenes, and engage in other law enforcement activities. Agencies responsible for border protection secure land borders and coastal waters between ports of entry, including apprehending alleged and convicted terrorists, drug smugglers, and people crossing borders unlawfully. Lawyers and prosecutors defend or prosecute accused individuals in a court of law and judges adjudicate those cases. They are aided by clerks, who manage the court's nonjudicial functions; and court administrators, who provide legislative, legal, financial, technology, management, administrative, and program support services to courts. Corrections officers take care of the custody, supervision, and safety of inmates and, later, probation officers ensure compliance with court-orders applicable to those sentenced to probation; and parole officers work with people following release.

As one might expect, turnover is high among many of these professions. For example, 47% more police officers resigned in 2022 than in 2019.⁶ And, among almost half of corrections agencies, annual officer turnover rates range from 20% to more than 30%.⁷

Professionals in specific areas of the justice system and the challenges they face include:

Law Enforcement Officers

LEOs are exposed to traumatic events, from violent crimes and active shooter situations to terrorist activity, which can result in increased rates of depression, alcohol abuse, cardiovascular disease and domestic violence to PTSD and suicide.⁸ In the US, LEOs are at a 54% greater risk of suicide than compared to the civilian population.⁹

Factors that further exacerbate the mental health matters of LEOs include frequent, negative criticisms in the news and on social media. In addition, a prevailing culture that stigmatizes using mental health resources commonly dissuades LEOs from seeking help. Furthermore, LEOs worry that reaching out to mental health professionals could ultimately negatively impact their careers.¹⁰

Also related to justice system professions is an experience known as “moral injury”. Moral injuries occur when witnessing, perpetrating, or failing to prevent actions that go against a person's moral beliefs or expectations.¹¹ Over time, moral injuries can affect how a LEO sees their job and even what they believe. A moral injury can impact performance and even the desire to stay in the profession.¹²

Attorneys and Judges

A survey of legal professionals found 72% experienced stress and burnout by work in the past year.¹³ Another survey found that burnout and stress from work negatively affected sleep, anxiety, and personal relationships.¹⁴ In addition, attorneys, like other judicial employees, may work with people who have challenging personalities. What's more, they may experience vicarious trauma from the stories, pictures, and evidence they encounter when working on criminal cases.

These stressors can lead to depression and insomnia. One study found that 61.1% of lawyers surveyed reported experiencing anxiety and 45.7% pointed to depression.¹⁵ Lawyers also are noted to be twice as likely to overconsume alcohol than the general public.¹⁶

Similarly, studies show that judges also struggle with job-related stress. According to a report in the 2020 Journal of the Professional Lawyer, one-third of judges surveyed reported fatigue, sleep disturbances, and other stress-related conditions stemming from the impact of their decisions, heavy caseloads, among other factors.¹⁷ These and other stressors can impact a judge's performance.¹⁸

Corrections Officers

Corrections officers' complex and demanding jail/prison workplace environments can contribute to negative health outcomes and increased work-related stress. That includes repeated exposure to multiple types of co-occurring operational, organizational, and traumatic stressors. The cumulative effect on corrections professionals and the correctional workplace environment is articulated by the umbrella term (used colloquially) of "corrections fatigue" or "correctional burnout". It encompasses low staff morale, impaired job performance, individual health and functioning conditions, challenging professional and personal relationships, and high staff turnover. Worse, many of these matters interact, compounding the impact of each and reinforcing a negative cycle.

In severe cases, work-related stress can lead to suicide. In the US, for example, the Federal Bureau of Prisons' suicide rate is higher than the average law enforcement rate.¹⁹ Similarly, US corrections officers are at 41% greater risk of suicide than the rest of the US workforce.²⁰

Probation and Parole Officers

Both probation and parole officers work with populations of people convicted of crimes. And both experience high levels of job-related stress that stems largely from high caseloads, demanding paperwork, multiple deadlines, and other factors. It could also be a reflection of changing job expectations over the last 10 to 15 years, as probation work, in particular, has shifted to include both law enforcement and social work.²¹

A Holistic Approach to Resilience

Over the past few years, amid an increase in suicides among some sectors of law enforcement and a greater awareness of the importance of mental health, government agencies have stepped up their focus on building resilience among justice professionals.

Key to those efforts is adopting a holistic approach—a comprehensive strategy that encompasses the spectrum of critical services and activities, from data analysis to peer counseling. One example of such a program is United States Customs and Board Protection (CBP), which created the Workforce Care Directorate aimed at resilience-building. Through the program, CBP increased the number of clinicians, as well as people staffing a help hotline; started a program deploying canines in the field to help with trauma; and is developing a help app for staff and their families, among other efforts. It also uses immediate data capture to create dashboards that provide a comprehensive overview of service use and staff needs.

Other steps to address mental health challenges experienced by justice system professionals include revamped methods for responding to the immediate aftermath of a staff suicide. For example, creating a postvention playbook that outlines step-by-step directions for leaders to take when supporting employees after the traumatic event could be helpful.²²

In addition, to engage employees and improve their workplace cultures, LE organizations are piloting low-cost, high-impact employee recognition and well-being initiatives. One example is a “gratitude campaign”, which involves a set of activities and programming to boost staff morale, introduce staff to the practice of gratitude and appreciation, and promote employee support programming, while also engaging and increasing awareness of the peer support team.

Steps for Building Resilience

Data collection and analytics. A critical element in identifying trends related to resilience programming and suicide prevention is gathering and analyzing the right data. With that in mind, programs can leverage critical incident and other data elements that are associated with suicide risk to advocate for vital resources. Agencies that have implemented data collection and mandatory reporting have used their analyses to create targeted messaging and increase tailored services for common mental health related matters. Other initiatives are laying the groundwork for more data collection. For example, the US Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection Act of 2022 provides a mechanism for law enforcement agencies to report suicides and attempted suicides of law enforcement personnel to help with compiling national statistics on these incidents.

To encourage reporting and tracking of suicide attempts, agencies can take a few steps. First is emphasizing the confidentiality of the information by using anonymous surveys. Another is framing insights in a way that underscores their potential to save lives.

Many agencies also collect and analyze data to facilitate informed leadership decisions and proactively respond to challenges. For example, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) collects monthly data on the number of hours, the referral process, and type of incident response. Peer support members who input data must then attest that all data elements have been inputted accurately to the best of their knowledge. This has helped improve the reliability of data entry and can help dispel misconceptions that seeking help may negatively impact security clearances or careers.

Culture change and narrative shifts. Creating a help-seeking culture for justice professionals that prioritizes mental health requires an intentional, well-developed, and consistently implemented strategy. Central to those efforts is messaging that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness, and that it is an important component of workplace performance. That also should include providing information on peer support, employee assistance programs, and other resilience programs not only during onboarding, but afterward, as well.

The role of leadership. Leaders play a critical part in creating supportive environments, reducing the stigma connected to mental health matters, and fostering a sense of purpose. Central to those efforts is leading by example—openly discussing their own mental health challenges and use of support resources.

Also important are:

- Demonstrating that using mental health resources will not necessarily hinder career advancement or duty status
- Promoting messaging and communications that normalize help-seeking
- Using data to underscore the importance of change
- Incentivizing participation in programs and activities that promote help-seeking and peer support
- Normalizing conversations surrounding mental health

At the same time, creating programs to build resilience and prevent suicide requires having enough resources to make them happen—and those resources may not always be available. Too often, agencies do not provide the backing these efforts require. As a result, success may depend on the ability of staff at individual institutions to coordinate, manage, and sometimes fund these programs.

Nonetheless, the stakes are too high for agencies and other justice system organizations not to act. That means prioritizing the mental health of justice professionals and helping ensure they get the help they need—confidentiality. Ultimately, building the long-term resilience of these professionals can contribute to a more effective system of justice—and support society's responsibility to protect their well-being.



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Endnotes

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