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What is This?

The Emotional Impact on and Coping Strategies Employed by Police Teams Investigating Internet Child Exploitation

Carolyn M. Burns, Jeff Morley, Richard Bradshaw, and José Domene

Work on Internet child exploitation (ICE) teams require individuals to perform a number of investigative tasks, including viewing graphic images and videos of young children being sexually assaulted and tortured, to identify victims and locate perpetrators. Individuals involved in this work may be at higher risk for experiencing secondary traumatic stress because of the graphic images and sounds to which they are exposed. The impact of ICE investigations and what helps and hinders coping with the work was explored using the Critical Incident Technique with 14 members of a Royal Canadian Mounted Police integrated ICE team. Results suggest that there are a number of organizational and personal strategies that can assist those who work in this field to cope more effectively.

Keywords: secondary traumatic stress; vicarious trauma; emotional impact; witnessing; police; criminal justice system; Internet; child exploitation

Access to the World Wide Web has become a reality for millions of people in our society during the past decade. Recognition of the value of advancing technologies has rapidly made the Internet an indispensable tool for use in business, education, and personal and family communication. In Canada, there is at least one regular Internet user in 64% of households, accessing the Internet from the home, school, public library, or other location (Statistics Canada, 2003). The Internet is fuelled by the wealth of easily available information, offering global searches on every topic imaginable; it provides instant communication and opportunities to plan and book vacations and purchase automobiles and other goods and services at the stroke of a key. Access to the Internet has forever changed the world, creating a truly global society (Bargh & McKenna, 2003).

From Trinity Western University, Langley, British Columbia (CMB, RB, JD), and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (JM), Canada.

Address correspondence to: Carolyn M. Burns, 7600 Glover Road, Langley, BC, V2Y 1Y1, Canada; e-mail: carolyn.burns@shaw.ca.

Along with its benefits, Internet access has a very dark side. The privacy and anonymity afforded by the Internet has created a vast repository for collectors and preferential child molesters seeking to prey on the most vulnerable members of society. The availability and affordability of digital cameras, videos, and webcams has opened the doors to the production and online trading of graphic child abuse images. Technological advances have facilitated the increased availability of child pornography in Canada and internationally and contributed to the development of advertising for child sex tourism destinations (Criminal Intelligence Service Canada [CISC], 2005). As a result, criminal networks have emerged online to share child pornography, learn how to produce child pornography, and exchange tips on how to avoid detection (CISC, 2005).

In the mid-1990s police agencies across the globe began to recognize that the Internet was being used as a tool to facilitate child exploitation. In response, the first investigative units dedicated to identifying and locating victims and suspects of Internet child exploitation (ICE) were created. Since that time, ICE units have emerged internationally as police agencies respond to the increasing volume of tips and requests for assistance. According to the Virtual Globe Task Force, a partnership comprising the

Australian High Tech Crime Centre, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and Interpol, there are an estimated 50,000 sexual predators online at any given moment (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2006). And although it is impossible to accurately estimate the numbers of child sexual abuse images on the World Wide Web, there is a general consensus that the Internet has significantly increased the accessibility and availability of this material (Wells, Finkelhor, Wolak, & Mitchell, 2004).

The role and responsibility of an ICE team member is quite diverse, ranging from interviewing, report writing, conducting technical computer searches, offering guidance to other agencies, making arrests, supporting families, comforting victims, and providing information to the judiciary, law enforcement, and the general public (Gray, 2006).[1] ICE work carries its own unique set of challenges. These stem from (a) the relative recency of the laws, (b) uneducated judiciary, (c) the multi-jurisdictional nature of investigations, (d) ever-changing technologies, (e) differences in laws throughout the world, (f) the anonymity the Internet offers to offenders, (g) the lack of policing resources, (h) the enormous volume of requests for assistance, and (i) the sheer number of investigations (J. Gray, personal communication, May 4, 2006).

Members of ICE units are also required to view graphic images depicting the sexual abuse of children as part of their ongoing criminal investigations, in an effort to identify victims and suspects and obtain evidence for eventual prosecution. The content they are exposed to can range from still photographs of young children, to explicit video (with sound) of infants being tortured and raped. The amount of time spent viewing varies; however, it is a substantial aspect of the investigation, and one that can have a significant impact on investigators.

Research with professionals in the helping field has revealed that exposure to other peoples' difficult and traumatic experiences can lead to reactions similar in nature to posttraumatic stress disorder (Figley, 1995a; Herman, 1992; Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996; Stamm, 1997). These symptoms and reactions are referred to as compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995a), vicarious trauma (Pearlman & MacIan, 1995), or secondary traumatic stress (Stamm, 1997). They constitute the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about traumatizing events experienced by significant others and/or stress resulting from helping, or wanting to help, traumatized or suffering persons (Figley, 1995b).

Studies of police officers investigating serious and violent offences have revealed that exposure to these types of investigations (particularly homicides involving children, sexual assaults, cases of child abuse and neglect, and child sexual abuse) place investigators at greater risk of developing secondary traumatic stress (Brown, Fielding, & Grover, 1999; Clarkson, 2006; Follette, Polusny, & Milbeck, 1994; Hallett, 1996; Holmberg, 2004; Lea, Auburn, & Kibblewhite, 1999; Martin, McKean, & Velktramp, 1986; Sewell, 1994). To function effectively, many police officers attempt to remain objective and professional by disengaging from their emotions during these investigations (Evans, Coman, Stanley, & Burrows, 1993; Pogrebin & Poole, 1991; Sewell, 1994; Violanti, 1999). Over time, this constant exposure to human suffering may lead to a breakdown in normal coping mechanisms, placing officers at higher risk of developing secondary traumatic stress (Haisch & Meyers, 2004; Violanti & Gehrke, 2004).

A number of recent studies have identified that significant indirect exposure to tragedy and mass suffering through video, still images, or media coverage can lead individuals to experience symptoms of vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress. Keats (2005) explored the concept of vicarious witnessing in four World War II concentration and extermination camps in Poland and Germany. Participants in this study were exposed to graphic and potentially traumatizing images and experienced a range of emotional, physical, and spiritual reactions similar to symptoms of secondary traumatic stress. Studies conducted with individuals in emergency service–related occupations (police, fire, U.S. military) post–September 11, 2001, identified significant traumatic responses occurring in individuals indirectly exposed to the tragedy through extensive and graphic media coverage (Beaton, Murphy, Johnson, & Nemuth, 2004; Doherty, 2004; Spekhard, 2002).

Although police officers can be exposed to stress and trauma on a routine basis, trauma exposure can act as a catalyst for positive growth and adaptation (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Studies exploring the area of coping and resilience in police officer populations have revealed a number of specific protective factors that facilitate the development of resilience and prevent the development of secondary traumatic stress. According to Paton (2006), these factors can

be identified on three levels: (a) personal (self-efficacy, coherence, hardiness); (b) team (cohesive, collective efficacy); and (c) environmental (empowerment, duty of care, crisis procedures). The use of humor, peer support networks, training and education, planning ahead, organizational support, mental and physical fitness, lifestyle education, and encouraging a sense of control have also been identified as helpful to the police officer's well-being (Brown, Cooper, & Kirkcaldy, 1996; Burke, 1998; Follette et al, 1994; Morley, 2003; Violanti, 1999). Having a sense of meaning about their work, the presence of compassion satisfaction, and positive coping strategies all serve to strengthen protective barriers and mitigate secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 1995a; Hart, Wearing, & Heady, 1995; Hope, 2006; Salston & Figley, 2003; Stamm, 2005).

Purpose and Significance of This Research

In light of the literature reviewed above, it is likely that the work performed by ICE members places them at risk for developing secondary traumatic stress. As the number of child exploitation cases continues to increase, so too will the requirement for more trained individuals to investigate these difficult cases. The absence of research on the best ways to assist ICE members to cope with their work is highly problematic. There is a critical need to identify and develop ways to provide the best possible support to them in an effort to mitigate their risk of developing secondary traumatic stress. To begin to address this need, the present study identified what helps and what hinders coping among members working on an ICE team. *Healthy coping* was defined as maintaining physical, mental, and emotional health. Consistent with the assumptions of the research paradigm used in this study, participants were permitted to determine for themselves how healthy their coping had been.

Methodology

Participants

Fourteen individuals (10 women and 4 men) working with the "E" Division ICE team participated in the interviews. Ten participants were regular members of the RCMP or City Police Department, two were public service employees, and two were temporary

Table 1.   Summary of Demographic Information for 14 Participants

	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age (years)	25-52	40.07	8.65
Time on ICE (months)	2-36	14.50	10.04
Time in policing[a] (months)	2-360	160.14	121.34

NOTE: ICE, Internet child exploitation.
a. Policing includes time spent as a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or other police force as well as time spent working for a police force in other capacities.

civilian employees. Participants varied in gender, age, cultural background, length of service, and type of experience (see Table 1). Six individuals had children, whereas eight did not.

As this study was exploratory in nature, participants were not required to be experiencing symptoms of secondary traumatic stress or to have undergone any interventions to be included in the study. They were required to be working with the "E" Division ICE team. For the purposes of this study, all participants, regardless of their status as police officers, public service workers, or temporary civilian employees, will be referred to as *ICE team members*.

Procedures

Data were collected and analyzed using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), a qualitative research method that is designed to gain an understanding of an individual's experience as it is reflected in specific "incidents"—concrete events related to the phenomenon of interest that had a positive or negative impact on the participant (Wong, 2000). Since its creation by Flanagan (1954), CIT has been applied to research in areas including nursing, job analysis, counseling, education and teaching, medicine, marketing, organizational learning, performance appraisal, psychology, and social work (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; Woolsey, 1986). CIT involves collecting data through semistructured interviews, systematic inductive qualitative analysis, and specific procedures for maintaining the rigor and integrity of the process. CIT was selected as the method of choice because it offered a sound, well-established approach to explorative data collection, with a number of reliability and validity checks built into the process. Additionally, it offers a high level of safety for participants, which is a necessity, given the

nature of the phenomenon being studied. The CIT methodology provided participants with the opportunity to control the information they shared. In addition, the approach CIT researchers use when interviewing participants closely resembles operational debriefings in which police officers routinely participate. Given this similarity, it was assumed that participants would be more comfortable engaging with this process than in other forms of qualitative interviewing.

Interviews

To start off each interview, participants were asked, "Think back over your time on the ICE team. Can you remember a specific event that you believe either helped or made it harder for you to cope with the work?" Following this first question, participants were asked to describe each incident more fully, providing information on the personal meaning each incident held for them. The questioning proceeded until participants were unable to offer any further examples. All participant interviews were digitally audiorecorded and later transcribed in natural language to faithfully capture the descriptions of incidents.

Data Analysis

There were three steps to data analysis: Incidents were extracted from the transcripts and placed on cards, with one incident per card. The cards were then grouped into similar categories and subcategories. The categories and subcategories then underwent a series of reliability and validity checks.

Extraction of incidents. All participant interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcript of each interview was reviewed carefully, and critical incidents were identified. Audiorecordings and interviewer notes were used extensively when working with the data. Once an incident was identified, the actual transcribed words spoken by the participant were duplicated onto index cards, one incident per card. Information presented on each card fell into the categories adapted from Woolsey's (1986) heading system: (a) the general context (type of event), (b) the specific context (exactly what happened), and (c) the source (what really made the event helpful or hindering for coping with ICE work).

Accuracy of reports. Accuracy was determined by the richness of detail when describing the incident. As

outlined by Flanagan (1954), the researcher must ensure that the incident is recalled in sufficient detail before selecting it for inclusion. This was achieved by including only those incidents that contained general information about the circumstance surrounding the specific incident—what was said, done, or experienced, and recall of the meaning of the incident for the participant. If the initial description of an incident was lacking in detail, follow-up questions were asked during the interview in an attempt to elicit sufficient detail.

Category formation. After all the incidents were extracted, they were analyzed through a process of inductive reasoning. Specifically, categories were formed by clustering incidents that were thematically similar in nature. When forming clusters, incidents themselves were considered, along with their underlying meaning. Once the cards were sorted, self-explanatory category titles and descriptions were developed. Subcategories were formed within particular categories to identify specific constructs. Incidents were sorted until all the categories and subcategories clearly reflected the entirety of the data.

Reliability and Validation Procedures

Following the recommendations of Butterfield et al. (2005), nine credibility and trustworthiness checks were conducted. These were the following:

1. Critical incidents were independently extracted by two individuals.
2. Participant cross-checking (interpretive validity) was completed with six of the participants.
3. Two independent judges trained in the CIT methodology placed 25% of randomly chosen critical incidents into tentatively formed categories.
4. The point of exhaustiveness was tracked to ensure that the topic was fully explored.
5. Tentative categories that emerged from the data were submitted to two experts in the area of secondary traumatic stress for feedback.
6. A minimum 25% participation rate was required to develop each category.
7. Theoretical validity: Results were examined in light of the existing relevant scholarly literature for support and relevance.
8. Descriptive validity: Accuracy of the account was achieved by using the actual words of participants in their entirety during the extraction and category formation stages.

9. Interview fidelity was achieved by having the thesis supervisor, trained in CIT interviewing techniques, review every fourth interview to ensure compliance with the methodology.

These extensive credibility and trustworthiness checks were implemented to ensure that the final set of results was a valid representation of the participants' experience.

Results

From the 14 interviews, 795 incidents were identified. The analysis process resulted in the placement of 446 incidents into 12 helping categories and 40 helping subcategories (Table 2), and 349 incidents into 12 hindering categories and 35 hindering subcategories (Table 3).

Impact of Working on ICE

ICE work requires investigators to not only investigate the rape and torture of innocent children but often to watch it happen first, as part of the investigation process. As one investigator described, "It's like standing in front of a window watching it happen and there is nothing you can do to stop it."

Awareness of the horrors/scope of the work. Although most team members thought they were aware of the reality of child exploitation prior to beginning their work on ICE, being exposed to the sheer volume of investigations and the level of depravity involved in the acts affected them extremely and was often quite overwhelming.

Physical and emotional impact on self and home. Many participants described experiencing both physical and emotional reactions to the work, including headaches, fluctuating moods, and extreme fatigue. These reactions often prevented team members from engaging in their normal activities outside of work. It also left some feeling that they were unable to fulfill their responsibilities to families and friends.

Intrusive images and thoughts about the material. Each participant described experiencing a range of reactions, depending on the content, the time spent viewing, and their own physical and emotional state while viewing. Some participants exposed to particularly difficult images described experiencing nightmares and flashbacks. One described hearing a child having a

Table 2.   Incidents That Help Coping With ICE Work

Category of Incident	Number of Incidents (Percentage of Total)	Number of Participants (Percentage of Total)
1. Viewing strategies	66 (15%)	14 (100%)
2. Psychological support	66 (15%)	13 (93%)
3. Personal strategies	62 (14%)	13 (93%)
4. Peer support	54 (12%)	14 (100%)
5. Meaningfulness/Purpose	41 (9%)	10 (71%)
6. Social support	34 (8%)	12 (86%)
7. Personal characteristics	24 (5%)	10 (71%)
8. Cognitive strategies	23 (5%)	10 (71%)
9. Organizational support	21 (5%)	8 (57%)
10. Supervision	20 (4%)	11 (79%)
11. Humor	18 (4%)	11 (79%)
12. Candidate selection	18 (4%)	13 (93%)

NOTE: ICE, Internet child exploitation.

temper tantrum in a mall and thinking, "This is what it sounds like when a child is being raped."

Response of others to ICE work. Many team members felt stigmatized by others because of the work they did. Several described feeling isolated and unable to talk about the incredibly important work they do because of the reaction of others. Team members felt this reaction was held by society in general, others in the criminal justice system, and even within their own policing community.

Inability to talk about the images. Participants who typically relied on talking as a main way of coping with difficult experiences felt unable to do so about their ICE work. Specifically, they were concerned that revealing the content of the images that they had seen would traumatize others.

Concerns about team. Several team members identified the closeness with and reliance on their team. Some described the concerns they experienced when those unable to cope unexpectedly left the unit. Others described the impact of seeing their colleagues become stressed and upset, and feeling such responsibility to the team that they remained in the work longer than they should.

Protectiveness/Paranoia regarding children. Many participants found that being exposed to this work made them far more protective of children. This protectiveness took several forms, including (a) always being on guard when they were out, constantly watching the behavior of those around children;

Table 3. Incidents That Hinder Coping With ICE Work

Category of Incident	Number of Incidents (Percentage of Total)	Number of Participants (Percentage of Total)
1. Impacts of ICE work	110 (32%)	13 (93%)
2. Criminal Justice System	42 (12%)	10 (71%)
3. Viewing	36 (10%)	12 (86%)
4. Lack of resources	35 (10%)	11 (79%)
5. Psychological interventions	33 (97%)	12 (86%)
6. Organizational factors	32 (9%)	12 (86%)
7. Workload	24 (7%)	9 (64%)
8. Technology	16 (5%)	4 (28%)
9. Newness of unit	10 (3%)	4 (28%)
10. Government policies/ International challenges	9 (3%)	4 (28%)
11. Working on lengthy file	9 (3%)	6 (43%)
12. Lack of societal understanding of the seriousness of ICE[a]	7 (2%)	3 (21%)

NOTE: ICE, Internet child exploitation.

a. Although the participant rate for category formation was set at 25%, this category was added following feedback from 63% of the sample during participant checks.

(b) experiencing an overwhelming need to teach every parent and child about Internet safety and the inherent dangers; and (c) becoming far more restrictive of their own children, limiting the activities that they permitted their children to engage in because of their own fears. One participant described her new reality: "I am far more paranoid now because I now know what they could do to my child."

Viewing Strategies

Gradual introduction to images. A graduated exposure to the traumatizing images was found to be helpful to those new to the unit. Although it was rare that this was possible because they had to work on whichever file was priority, those who experienced a gradual introduction found that it helped them prepare for increasingly difficult materials.

Mental preparation. All ICE team members interviewed found that having the opportunity to prepare mentally for viewing was helpful. Several described getting into the right "head space," where they prepare themselves to see the worst images imaginable.

Dissociation and compartmentalization. Making a deliberate choice to take the images they were viewing and change how they perceived them was found to be helpful. Some were able to pretend that the victims were not real children; others found they were able to shut down their emotions, which helped them view more objectively. Not looking the victim in the eyes or making connections between a child they knew and the victim was very important.

Monitoring self and taking breaks. Several found that being personally aware of how they were reacting while viewing was extremely important. Taking a break, going for a run, and talking to others were all helpful strategies to assist when they began to view from emotional perspectives.

Focusing on evidence/remaining analytical. Remaining analytical and focusing on the evidence in the images was an effective way to remain professional. Following a mental template and working systematically to gather the information required from the images for the investigation allowed individuals to remain more objective.

Determining when, where, and how to view. Participants described specific factors that influenced their ability to cope with viewing, although they also revealed that it was often not possible to control these factors. Several found it to be beneficial to view in the morning because it allowed several hours for the images to dissipate in their minds before they left for homes and families. They also found it helpful to limit the amount of viewing done each day, to mix viewing with other investigative tasks, and to not view when in a tired or emotional state. Having a private environment suitable for viewing, team members to keep an eye on them, the ability to take breaks, and others to talk to when viewing particularly horrific images were all strategies that were found to be helpful.

Personal Strategies

Many participants described a number of personal strategies that helped them cope with the work. Some of these included hobbies that distracted their minds, regular intense exercise, grounding activities such as yoga and taking walks, listening to music, and placing daily time limits on viewing. It was perceived as critical to set personal boundaries with the

work and to know when it was time to leave the unit. Several team members described the importance of leaving work at work at the end of each day, being aware of personal limitations, and setting realistic expectations about how much one person could achieve.

Mitigating Factors

There were a number of additional factors that helped them cope with their work. These are described below.

Personal characteristics. Being the right person for the job and having the proper training and experience greatly assisted team members because they were able to use their previous experiences as foundations from which to learn about ICE investigations and from which to frame their decisions and actions.

Supervision. Not only having good supervisors but having supervisors who understood the impact of ICE work was perceived to be vitally important because such managers are able to support their team members in doing what they need to cope.

Humor. The use of humor played a key role in coping with the work. As one team member stated, "It takes the toxicity out of the moment." Humor was used effectively to bond the team together, to release tension during particularly difficult moments, and to cut loose and have fun.

Sense of control. It was important to feel a sense of control over the work, including taking the lead in investigations, determining when, where, and how to view, having the opportunity to become mentally prepared prior to viewing, and feeling empowered to take breaks when required. Gaining some sense of control was especially helpful to team members, given the feelings of helplessness and frustration that they often experienced.

Candidate selection. Candidates transferring to the unit needed to be self-motivated, able to learn on an ongoing basis, able to experience a sense of meaning and purpose in the work, and able to cope with the pressures and challenges presented by ICE work. Because there is so much reliance on the team, participants felt that it was critical that great care and attention was placed on selecting the right individuals for the unit.

Organizational support. Team members found that receiving appropriate organizational support greatly added to their sense of well-being. Training opportunities, having the right equipment, proper supervision, and access to psychological support allowed participants to cope more effectively and focus more completely on their investigations.

Social support. Most of the team members made a point of accessing additional support from people outside the ICE team. Having supportive spouses, family members, or close friends provided opportunities to share feelings and experiences, and offered companionship to engage in outside activities with, such as camping, baseball, or driving. Having a sense that they were not alone in the world was extremely important.

Psychological support. Access to psychological support was viewed as extremely important to participants. Several team members described annual psychological assessments as a "safety net." Also, having a professional to talk to became "another useful tool in the tool box," as long as that helping professional was aware of the type of work they did and anticipated the effect of ICE work. Participants also expressed interest in receiving psychoeducational sessions on coping skills, obtaining information on possible reactions to viewing graphic and disturbing images, and having information sessions for family members to assist them in understanding and offering support.

Additional Risk Factors

Factors that made it more difficult to cope with the work are given below.

Lack of understanding about ICE. All the team members felt a lack of understanding from society, which resulted in inappropriate responses, lack of funding, and processes that tied investigators hands in many multijurisdictional investigations. This prevented investigators from locating and saving children who were currently being tortured and exploited, and increased their sense of anger and frustration with the situation.

Investigators reported that lack of understanding from the Criminal Justice System resulted in outdated procedural requirements, which extended every investigation for many months and often years. These procedural requirements frequently prevented

investigators from arresting preferential child molesters and collectors who, while remaining at large, were then able to continue committing their crimes while investigations were going on. Minimal punishments if accused pedophiles were found guilty and judges who would not view images at the time of sentencing contributed to increasing levels of frustration and hampered investigations.

Lack of understanding from the police universe resulted in suboptimal decisions being made regarding ICE teams. This encompassed a range of internal organizational issues, including candidate screening and selection, office space and environment, unit funding, and supervision. Lack of understanding was also perceived to be related to other challenges to participants' ability to cope with their work, such as volume of workload, having to view increasing depravity and violence perpetrated against infants and children, difficulties posed by ever-increasing technology, the newness of ICE units across the country, and national and international policies on child exploitation.

Discussion

This study expands current knowledge in the area of secondary traumatic stress by extending it to a previously understudied domain. Participants in the majority of previous secondary traumatic stress research have been therapists working with victims of trauma. Although there have been more recent studies involving law enforcement, there is little known about the impact of ICE work. This particular study has extended the knowledge of secondary traumatic stress further into the ICE investigation environment, where individuals are routinely exposed to extremely difficult events and situations.

One unique aspect of ICE work is that team members are exposed to visual and audio images of horrific crimes being perpetrated against children, rather than the narrative recollections that therapists tend to experience. Extending secondary traumatic stress research into ICE populations has provided an opportunity to test the relevance of existing knowledge of secondary traumatic stress for populations other than mental health professionals.

The results from this study suggest that many of the findings on secondary traumatization experienced by mental health professionals are, indeed, relevant for those working on ICE teams. Participants' descriptions of coping strategies that they found

helpful as well as their general resilience in the face of substantial challenges and difficulties inherent in the work were consistent with the broader literature on coping and resilience in police work. Many of them identified strategies that helped or hindered them in coping, which can be mapped onto the three-level resilience framework described by Paton (2006). Among other factors, participants described the importance of being the right person for the job, the reliance they placed on the team, and the necessity for supervisors to understand ICE work. Similarly, the finding that participants gained a strong sense of personal meaning and satisfaction in doing such important work and found that they were healthier when they were able to leave their work at work is consistent with Salston and Figley's (2003) research that identified factors that prevent or reduce compassion fatigue.

Some of the unique results that emerged from this study relate to (a) the intensity of ICE work (including viewing, impact, personal strategies, team, sense of responsibility, and supervision) and (b) the impact of the reality of child exploitation, including the frustrations experienced by participants because an awareness of the scope of the problem has not yet permeated the layers of society, the Criminal Justice System, and policing organizations.

Because of the nature of ICE investigations, team members are faced with substantial challenges in their daily work. Viewing graphic images with sound, exposed to the powerlessness of child and infant victims, hearing the screams, seeing the terror and pain in their faces, all have a profound impact on team members. Although previous studies have identified that media exposure to traumatic events results in trauma reactions, exposure to graphic images during an ICE investigation appears to be qualitatively different from the majority of traumatic events that one could be exposed to through the media. According to participants, the images they are required to view can be extremely horrific and sadistic. The content, by its very nature, involves heinous sexual acts perpetrated against children or infants. The investigators must view and document this material in its entirety, which usually involves viewing hundreds of these images on a daily basis. As they work full time on the ICE team, they are repeatedly exposed to this material over an extended period of time. These individuals, sworn to protect the public, carry a deep sense of responsibility for the investigation and to the young victims and

their families. Additional roadblocks such as technological advancements and the ability of perpetrators to remain virtually anonymous as a result of the World Wide Web add layers of complexity and challenge. ICE team members are often immersed in investigations for long periods of time, increasing the chance of developing a personal connection with the victim. As a result, ICE investigations stand out as being particularly difficult.

According to participants, more time spent viewing, viewing more intense material, and not taking breaks was found to be the most hindering. Because of the risk of potential trauma from exposure to these images, proper supervision and organizational support is required. Adequate resourcing, policy, and availability of psychological interventions must be in place to support team members. Advocacy for changes throughout society, the criminal justice system, and within policing organizations would further assist team members.

The close team bond between members and the reliance they place on each other for support is extremely helpful during difficult moments in the work. Given the nature of the work, other natural coping avenues normally pursued, such as talking with loved ones, friends, or peers outside the unit are far less available to team members.

ICE team members are often exposed to a variety of images ranging from still pictures to video with sound and even online live feed of children and infants being sexually abused and tortured. These images and exposures accumulate and inform ICE team members so that they bring that knowledge with them when they view other images or are faced with similar circumstances. This acquired knowledge can compound the impact of viewing even fairly innocuous images, because team members bring with them the knowledge of what may have happened before a photograph was taken or what might happen afterward. This idea of *stored knowledge*, first introduced by Keats (2005), speaks to the lasting effects of witnessing graphic material. This knowledge influences the lens through which ICE team members view materials, making what they see more horrifying and believable.

Sheehan, Everly, and Langlieb (2004) describe the importance of developing protective psychological barriers for investigators to remain healthy. The use of inoculation sessions, showing images as a pre-screening tool, gradual introduction to images, and mental preparation prior to viewing may all aid in the development of such protective psychological barriers for ICE members.

Psychological interventions designed to educate ICE members, supervisors, families, peers, and mental health professionals about the work, common reactions, and ways to cope (or how to support a loved one) may offer a greater sense of support and diminish the sense of isolation team members currently experience. Having access to a number of professionals familiar with the work and the policing culture increases the likelihood that team members will access professional help. Having inoculation sessions for newcomers to the unit, regular debriefing sessions with close team members, and mandatory annual psychological assessments will assist in the health and well-being of these members. Working with team members to raise awareness of protective factors may provide them with additional tools they can use to help them remain healthy in this difficult work.

The information provided by this study may be useful for those currently serving in, or those contemplating joining, ICE units. The pragmatic information obtained through this study provides the opportunity to learn more about what experienced ICE team members perceive as helpful and incorporate many of these strategies into current or future repertoires. The knowledge gained through the experiences of these participants may result in changes in scheduling, behavior, ways of relating to others, and frequency of accessing psychological help. Candidate selection, use of images as a pre-screening tool, rotating job duties, placing firm limits on the quantity and amount of time involved in viewing, following through to ensure that team members are attending annual psychological assessments, inoculations, and other ongoing psychological interventions were found to be important to the well-being of participants. These strategies can assist ICE unit members in remaining physically and psychologically healthy.

Implications for Practitioners

These findings can inform the practice of counseling psychologists working with ICE team members. The more knowledge counselors and psychologists acquire on this topic, the better equipped they will be to provide psychological care for those working on ICE teams. Several of the participants highlighted the importance of having access to psychologists who were familiar with police culture. Psychologists who understand the issues in policing organizations, power structures, hierarchies, organizational issues,

dynamics, and frustrations endemic to these jobs are viewed as more able to empathize, understand, and validate the experiences of police officers. Additionally, participants expressed having a greater comfort level accessing psychologists who had a specific awareness of ICE work. As several of the participants indicated, "Unless the professional is aware of what we see and how it impacts us, it is virtually impossible for them to understand how we feel."

Limitations

Although participants came from a variety of professional backgrounds and represented a range of ages and cultures, they had all been exposed to work on the same unit and provided information about their experiences working with the "E" Division ICE team. Although information presented in this study is very rich and should resonate with individuals on other ICE teams across North America, there may be issues and concerns specific to "E" Division ICE team members that have emerged in the themes and categories. For example, other ICE units may be less underresourced or may not have the same high quality of supervision that these participants experienced. Differences may reflect pervasive attitudes, experiences, and realities that are specific to this particular team.

Policing environments can be quite closed. There is a belief among many police officers that being competent means they must handle all aspects of the job and that any sign of weakness is a slight against their professionalism. Although participants appeared to be quite comfortable and open during interviews, it is possible that some were uncomfortable discussing certain issues with an "outsider" and elected to withhold aspects of their experiences. The semistructured, open interview format used with the CIT methodology empowered participants to decide what information they would reveal. This was necessary to create safety but may also have resulted in a limitation because it is not possible to determine whether the topic has been explored in its entirety.

This study was not designed to measure levels of secondary traumatic stress of team members. The findings do not account for the degree to which participants experienced secondary traumatic stress (if they did) or what specifically may have contributed to the development of secondary traumatic stress. Comparing individual levels of coping was not possible, because each participant's experience and exposure levels varied. As an example, participants'

time working on the ICE team ranged from 2 months to 36 months (see Table 1).

What this study did reveal was the range of activities, experiences, and circumstances that team members found to be helpful and hindering to coping with this work. This information will serve as a foundation from which to further explore such issues of prevalence and severity in future research studies.

Directions for Future Research

As this study was meant to provide a preliminary glimpse into the world of ICE team members and used a method that allowed participants to select the information they chose to share, there are a number of areas for future research.

It may prove interesting to explore the experiences of other ICE teams to see how they compare with those of the "E" Division ICE team and identify the similarities and differences between the experiences of team members in North America and across the globe. For example, is the close, "family" feel of the unit typical given the type of work that participants engage in, or is it more characteristic of the small size of the unit or the individuals who are on this particular ICE team?

Results from this study suggest that exposure to graphic images involving children and infants has the potential to affect investigators in significant ways. It would be beneficial to measure the prevalence of secondary traumatic stress in ICE team members, compare possible gender differences, and explore the degree of impact for parents of young children working on ICE. Comparing individual differences between those more severely affected and those who are not may provide the opportunity to identify other key protective factors.

Given the relationship between dissociation and posttraumatic stress disorder, it would be useful to examine the use of dissociation during viewing of traumatic material in ICE team populations to explore any correlation with long-term impact.

The existing literature has identified compassion satisfaction and personal meaning to be key factors in mitigating secondary traumatic stress. It would be valuable to explore whether these findings are applicable to ICE work. Certainly, participants reported that they found a great deal of personal meaning in this work. According to one team member, "You might not feel good about what you are seeing, but you feel good about what you are doing. You know that you are doing something important." Exploring

the impact of ICE work on individuals using a narrative or phenomenological methodology may also prove valuable. This information would develop a greater understanding of the impact of ICE work and may further assist in the development of helpful interventions for ICE members. Finally, some of the findings in this study may be pertinent for future studies in policing with respect to further understanding the impact of serious crime investigations on individuals.

Note

1. Sergeant Janis Gray, Noncommissioned Officer in charge of the "E" Division ICE team, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Canada.

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