



INVISIBLE SCARS:

POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER IN CORRECTIONS

BY CHRIS MCCONNELL

Although estimates vary, the average person will experience a few traumatic events in their lifetime. An average correctional officer may experience 200 to 600 traumatic events in their career. A traumatic event can be anything from homicides, stabbings, suicides, overdoses, assaults, self-harm, threats and manipulation. Exposure to these events can be direct involvement, information gathered through work, radio broadcasts or even a conversation with peers. Being continuously exposed to extreme violence and traumatic incidents over and over is resulting in acute and chronic post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

PTSD is no longer limited to military members returning home from conflicts or war. PTSD has found itself within our nation's jails and prisons. We know correctional staff wear many different hats, and corrections is one of the most

complex and challenging professions in public safety. But this service-over-self can come with a heavy cost. Studies are clearly showing correctional staff are internalizing and not properly processing the exposures to traumatic incidents, leading to high divorce rates, depression, heavy drinking, thoughts of suicide, burnout and PTSD.

Prevalence

Although little research has been conducted, some recent studies have shown between 19 percent and 34 percent of correctional officers suffer from PTSD compared to 14 percent of military veterans and approximately 6.8 percent in the general population.¹ Stop and think about that just for a second. At some very active medium to high security facilities, one-third of your correctional officers can be

suffering from PTSD. One-third of your correctional officer complement can be experiencing insomnia, panic attacks, flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, suicidal thoughts, depression or fatigue, to name a few. Many correctional officers avoid a positive test for PTSD in fear of being labeled as weak or being decertified and unable to work in a law enforcement capacity. Unfortunately, many often turn to drug and alcohol use to cope.

The average life expectancy of a correctional officer in the United States is 59 years old, compared to the general population average of 78 years old. In other words, two to five years after retirement, they may die. Correctional officers have a 40 percent higher suicide rate than the rest of the working-age population.² Furthermore, divorce rates in 2014 were approximately 21.3 percent,³ but sources today suggest the rates are between 60 percent and 70 percent. Shift work, irregular schedules, occupational hazards, high stress and trauma can negatively affect family life and marital strain.

Need for support

You can call or text the 988 suicide and crisis lifeline 24/7/365 for immediate, free and confidential help. Most agencies have a voluntary, work-based employee assistance program to assist with personal or work-related problems. Additionally, agencies may have medical professionals or chaplains to provide support. These initial steps can lead to wellness programs, professional or spiritual help, medications, support groups and lifestyle changes. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, but it's a first step if you are questioning why you are experiencing certain symptoms, feeling off or excessively drinking.

Seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. We must break the mold where seeking help is seen as a sign of failure or frowned upon. This archaic stigma is causing more damage than good. We owe it to our staff, and we must do better. Advocates, awareness and understanding are a start. Prison reform can address the needs of correctional officers as well as inmates.

Call to action

I recall being a young shift supervisor (lieutenant) and receiving a phone call one evening from a correctional officer requesting sick leave. I remember something was not right: slow speech, slurred words. I will never forget our conversation:

Me: *You good?*

Officer: *I knew I had to work tonight, but I still drank a case of beer.*

Me: *Do you need help?*

Officer: <reluctantly> *Yes.*

Me: *Here is what I'll do. I'm going to call our psychologist, give him a quick rundown about what is going on, and then connect both of you guys so you can talk. Is that cool with you?*

Officer: *Yes.* <The phone call took place>

If you spent any length of time in corrections, you most likely have firsthand knowledge of a correctional officer suicide. There are correctional staff struggling right now, today. If you see something, say something. "Are you all right? Is there anything I can do to help? Let's talk. Is there something on your mind? How is the family?" As a former complex warden with over 600 staff, I often said, "I want you healthy, happy and productive," in that order.

Conclusion

For correctional officers, traumatic exposures are part of their job description. In corrections, we refer to one another as brothers and sisters. As we fully support our biological brothers and sisters, similarly, we should fully support our correctional brothers and sisters.

By no means am I discouraging or disparaging anyone from pursuing one of the most rewarding professions on the face of the earth, but I am sounding the alarm and raising awareness that this epidemic can no longer fly under the radar and must be addressed.

Mental health is equally as important as your physical health and overall well-being. If we recognize the signs and symptoms, support one another and seek help together, we can significantly reduce the alarmingly high statistics.

Endnotes

1. Wilkinson & Finkbeiner. (2024, April 2). *Divorce statistics: Over 115 studies, facts and rates for 2024*. <https://www.wf-lawyers.com/divorce-statistics-and-facts>

2. Ibid

3. Darla, D. (2024, June 26). *SIU researchers find prison guards suffer PTSD and other issues but get little help*. WSIU Public Broadcasting.

https://www.wsIU.org/siu/2024-06-26/siu-researchers-find-prison-guards-suffer-ptsd-and-other-issues-but-get-little-help?utm_source=chatgpt.com

About the author

Chris McConnell retired from the Federal Bureau of Prisons after serving 30 years of dedicated service. He attained the position of senior executive service complex warden and was responsible for more than 600 staff. He served on a tactical team for 15 years and has functioned as an operator, assistant team leader and team leader. McConnell is a U.S. Army combat veteran and holds a B.S. degree in criminal justice. He can be reached at cmccconnell1968@outlook.com.

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