

# Workers at risk: Families serving alongside

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## **Heidi Cramm, Marilyn Cox, and Deborah Norris focus on the families of public safety personnel and health care workers (PSP and HCW), plus how the risks and requirements of the job impact them**

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Public safety personnel (PSP) and health care workers (HCW) are dedicated to serving our communities, and that commitment can take a toll on the mental and physical well-being of both the workers and their families. Cramm, Cox, and Norris work with the Families Matter Research Group (FMRG), a large team of researchers, educators, and trainees, some of whom are PSP and HCW family members themselves.

The FMRG recognizes the commitments and demands associated with public safety and healthcare work and the effects these have on family life and relationships beyond the workplace. Their primary objective is to form partnerships with families, workplaces, and other service providers to understand better the experience and needs of PSP and HCW families and promote evidence-informed programs and policies to support their health and well-being.

### **Importance of families**

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PSP and HCW jobs involve shift work, heavy workloads, and exposure to trauma; by extension, these factors affect families who must adjust and adapt to the demands of this lifestyle. Families serve alongside these workers by taking on additional responsibilities in the home, accommodating work schedules, and sometimes making sacrifices regarding their own interests and careers.

The FMRG adopts a broad concept of family, including all those who call themselves family, extending beyond the traditional configuration (i.e., nuclear family) to a more contemporary representation of families. Families form through emotional, physical, and social bonds between individuals who often (but not always) reside in the same household. These close interpersonal relationships are an important source of support, comfort, and security for PSP and HCW families.

Conflicts between work and family can arise for PSP and HCW families due to the high-level demands of the job, which puts family well-being at risk. Some families adapt well to this lifestyle, but the cumulative impact of everyday stressors and workplace demands can result in negative outcomes. Work- family conflict emerging from this demanding lifestyle can

create barriers to recruitment and impact decisions to leave these jobs. There is an urgent need for upstream resources to increase knowledge about the lifestyle's challenges and help PSP and HCW families develop strategies to manage the heightened demands.

## **Family resilience(y)**

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The capacity of families to resist, recover, and/or reconfigure in the face of normative and non-normative demands (i.e., crisis) is referred to as resiliency. It is not an inborn trait or ability, but an outcome that evolves through applying skills and capacities to situations and circumstances requiring adaptation, a process called resilience.

Conceptualizations of family resilience(y) focus on the capacity of the family as a functional, interdependent system in overcoming significant life challenges. Making meaning out of crisis and challenge and maintaining a positive outlook are facilitated through connection, clear, open, and collaborative communication, flexibility, and access to social and economic resources. In particular, the level of support from friends, neighbours, and extended family members impacts the ability of the family to respond to issues that arise. The extent to which organizational programs and policies are family- friendly and the status of public perceptions regarding PSP or HCW are instrumental in developing and maintaining resilience(y).

Resilience(y) in PSP and HCW families emerges through the bi-directional relationship between the families and the workplace. A disruption in the workplace (e.g., staff shortage) causes added stress for the PSP or HCW and an added burden for the family who tries to accommodate the shift change. This could be a minor inconvenience for some families and a breaking point for others depending on their unique circumstances (e.g., childcare or eldercare, dual-career households, health issues) and their capacity for resilience(y). The circumstances at home can correspondingly influence PSP's job performance and their response to work pressures.

## **Supporting PSP families**

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Research has shown that PSP families are unique due to logistics (e.g., nonstandard hours), risks (e.g., potential exposure to trauma), and identities associated with this lifestyle. Managing these cumulative and convergent factors combined with the everyday stressors of family life can be challenging for PSP families. Working with researchers Dr. Heather Hadjistavropoulos and Dr. Nathalie Reid, Dr. Cramm, and the FMRG developed an online resource to validate the experiences of PSP families, enhance awareness of aspects of PSP life, and support skill building. PSPNET Families is upstream, focusing on information regarding factors that can create tension in PSP families and pre-emptive strategies.

Researchers are advancing awareness of the heightened demands placed on PSP and HCW families, reaching out to them through town halls and focus groups to learn more about their experiences. There is a need for both prevention (i.e., online psychoeducation) and

resources for families already in crisis. Partnerships with mental health service providers and with PSP and HCW organizations can help further engagement with existing supports and understand where the gaps in service are.

## Challenge and conclusion

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Family relationships can be taken for granted, and the importance and well-being of the family unit neglected. Awareness of shared experience and the cumulative effects can support individual health and the quality of family relationships. Both PSP and their families are affected by the risks and requirements of the job. Rotating shifts and long hours require both the worker and the family to adjust to changes in daily routines. Workload-related stress and trauma exposure can translate into behaviours that disrupt family life. Family members can feel socially isolated.

Though many aspects of PSP work are non-negotiable, PSP and their families can be proactive by recognizing the role and value of the family and the effects of the PSP career on the family. Making plans, adjusting to change as a family, and developing effective communication skills can protect families from some stressors. Thinking about how your family is impacted by PSP work and talking to life partners and children about concerns and worries that they might have about the work are ways to manage problems that can arise.

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