

Study shows 33% of workers at homeless shelters suffer PTSD

March 21 2019, by Don Mcswiney



Frontline homeless shelter workers are more likely to experience PTSD than firefighters, police and nurses, a recent social work study says. Credit: [Jorge Lopez](#) on [Unsplash](#)

It's probably no surprise that many people who experience homelessness have experienced trauma in their lives. However, a new study led by the University of Calgary Faculty of Social Work shows that a surprisingly large number of individuals who work with people in homeless shelters also experience trauma on a regular basis.

The study, by UCalgary social work researcher Dr. Jeannette Waegemakers Schiff, Ph.D., and Athabasca University researcher Dr. Annette M. Lane, Ph.D., found that 33 per cent of those who work in [homeless shelters](#) experience symptoms of [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD).

Large study looked at experience of 472 frontline homeless shelter workers

The large study, recently published in the international Community Mental Health Journal, has looked at the experience of 472 individuals, in 23 different organizations, working in frontline positions in homeless shelters.

"It's definitely traumatizing to hear about or witness some of the horrible things that frontline workers encounter, especially when they have a personal relationship, or are trying to help those involved," says Waegemakers Schiff. "When people have no outlet for their emotions, things build over time, and that creates traumatic stress. They can't take a mental health day, or take time off because it's frowned upon. There aren't policies in any of these agencies that allow workers to take paid leave after a bad experience—the way that police or firefighters would for example."

Interestingly, the rate of PTSD experienced by those working in homeless shelters is much higher than other groups who routinely witness traumatic events. For example, studies show 10 to 14 per cent of police, firefighters and ambulance drivers, and 14 to 17 per cent of nurses may experience PTSD.

'Root-shift' needed in organizations to address trauma issue in shelters

The research was conducted with Calgary and Edmonton agencies, and found working with clients who have trauma-related issues creates a "constellation of issues" for frontline staff including vicarious traumatization, compassion fatigue, and burnout. In fact, the study showed 24 per cent of respondents experienced burnout and vicarious traumatization at sufficiently elevated levels to suggest they should step back from their present responsibilities. Another 20 per cent had a seriously diminished sense of "compassion satisfaction," meaning they no longer felt any innate positive feelings from helping others.

The study also captured a snapshot of working conditions within agencies working with those experiencing homelessness. Many workers are young, with minimal post-secondary education (over half have two or fewer years) even though they undertake complex role. Seventy-one per cent of workers in shelters earn less than \$50,000 annually. Perhaps as a result, turnover in homeless-serving agencies is very high. Forty-three per cent of staff have been employed in the homeless sector for less than two years, and nearly three-quarters were in their position for less than five years. This could also mean that there is often very little support from experienced staff in supporting younger workers experiencing work-related trauma.

The researchers hope that by shining a light on this issue, organizations may better understand the impact on staff who work in trauma-filled organizations.

"I strongly advocate for organizations to develop [trauma](#)-informed practices going forward because of the significant impact it's going to have on their staff," says Waegemakers Schiff, who is currently working on a followup study. "We need a root-shift in [organizational culture](#) ... to realize that there are things an organization can do that will either exacerbate traumatic responses in staff and clients, or lessen them, depending on the way you go."

Provided by University of Calgary

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