



A171 Understanding Current Levels of Forensic Occupational Stress and Wellness: Building a Foundation for Increased Forensic Science Workforce Resiliency

Justin Goldstein, MA*, Austin, TX 78748-0039; Helen S. Alesbury, MA, New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner, New York, NY 10016; Jamilla Dick-Quashie, MS, New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner, New York, NY 10016

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have a greater understanding of the mental health issues that are affecting specialists employed in the forensic sciences. Understanding the diversity of perspectives on how occupational stressors affect forensic professionals, particularly those who often work in mass fatality contexts, will help attendees not only identify issues in their own offices, but also suggest potentially beneficial interventions. This presentation will emphasize the unique challenges that forensic professionals face and start an important, data-driven dialogue regarding their specific needs.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by addressing a gap in current studies of wellness in forensic science training and employment using quantitative and qualitative results from a questionnaire approved for dissemination by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Institutional Review Board (Protocol #19-060). Currently, there is a significant lack of research that looks to address or understand the demands of working in medical examiner and coroner offices, let alone doing so in the wake of mass fatality incidents. Mass fatality incidents have become undeniably ingratiated into American culture, and thus it is vital to analyze potential sources of occupational stress and vicarious trauma that forensic professionals are exposed to as part of their daily work. Despite the analytical resources that have been directed toward studies of occupational stress, burnout, and vicarious trauma in emergency personnel following a mass fatality incident, current research either does not consider the experiences of the forensic staff at medical examiner and coroner offices, or does not focus on the specific, long-term effects a mass fatality incident has on forensic staff at medical examiner and coroner offices.¹⁻⁷

This study deployed a 23-question survey to the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) membership as well as operational staff at the Clark County Office of the Coroner/Medical Examiner (CCOCME) in Las Vegas, NV, who notably were tasked with processing the deadliest mass shooting to date in American history (October 1, 2017). Survey questions were designed to measure general levels of occupational stress and levels of perceived mental health support. Additionally, questions measuring the potential relationship between elevated levels of occupational stress and frequent contact with human remains and/or frequent contact with next of kin of human decedents were included in the survey. Questions obtaining general demographic information were also included to assess any additional trends. All questions included options to expand on answers to include qualitative data where possible. The survey was generated through the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner's Survey Monkey account, and IP address collection was disabled to ensure all participants remained anonymous. The survey was open for a total of six weeks, during which results from 99 individuals (40 from CCOCME and 59 from AAFS) were collected and analyzed.

Results suggest that future studies should consider occupational stress and wellness concerns of forensic professionals at higher, ethnographic resolutions. CCOCME respondents overwhelmingly (75%) reported that they felt contact with human remains and next of kin of decedents had altered their daily life outside of work hours, reporting changes in their interaction with friends and family. Notably, 50% of CCOCME staff and 74% of AAFS reported that they felt common mental health issues were not adequately addressed in occupational, academic, or professional training. Respondents of both survey groups reported feeling worn out from work (61% of AAFS, and 65% of CCOCME), highlighting the potential benefit of further developing wellness programming for the forensic science workforce.

In conclusion, this study finds that forensic professionals do report increased stress levels related to their daily work, as well as specific responses to mass fatality incidents. Additional qualitative responses to some questions also revealed the personal and individualized experiences in fatality management.

Reference(s):

1. Yoo Y.S., Cho O.H., Cha K.S., and Boo Y.J. (2013). Factors influencing post-traumatic stress in Korean forensic science investigators. *Asian Nursing Research*, 7(3):136-141.
2. Perrin M.A., DiGrande L., Wheeler K., Thorpe L., Farfel M., Brackbill R. (2007). Differences in PTSD prevalence and associated risk factors among world trade center disaster rescue and recovery workers. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 164:1385-1394.
3. Fullerton C.S., Ursano R.J., and Wang L. (2004). Acute stress disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and depression in disaster or rescue workers. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 161:1370-1376.
4. Grieger T.A., Fullerton C.S., Ursano R.J. (2004). Posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and perceived safety 13 months after September 11. *Psychiatric Services*, 55(9):1061-1063.
5. Ritter T.W. (2013). *The aftermath: Is post-traumatic stress disorder prevalent in medico-legal death investigators in the mid-Atlantic states?* (unpublished doctoral dissertation). Capella University, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
6. Waugh J.R. (2013). *Exposure to traumatic death events and traumatic event-related stress in crime scene investigators: A multiple regression analysis* (unpublished doctoral dissertation). Capella University, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
7. Galloway, A. (2014). Living on the sidelines of death: Anthropologists and violence. In DL Martin & CP Anderson (Eds.), *Bioarchaeological and Forensic Perspectives on Violence: How Violent Death is Interpreted from Skeletal Remains* (311-320). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wellness, Vicarious Trauma, Occupational Stress