# The Virtual Global Taskforce International Health and Wellness Research Project

# Health and Wellness among Online Child Sexual Exploitation Employees

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# Table of Contents

Unclassified Version

## Acknowledgements

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- The online child sexual exploitation employees (both current and former) from around the world, who took time to share their experiences to advance this research;
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*"You cannot unsee what we see."*

-Anonymous participant

**How can law enforcement agencies help to take care of employees working in the area of online child sexual exploitation when the above quote reflects their reality?**

This report is dedicated to all those who took the time to participate in this study –
without your contribution, we would not be getting
closer to answering the critical question above.

Thank you to all who work in this area – your dedication has helped and continues to help
protect children from online child sexual exploitation everywhere.

We hope this report helps you to take care and protect yourselves,
and helps organizations take care of you.

# Executive Summary

The Virtual Global Taskforce (VGT) represents an international alliance of dedicated law enforcement agencies, non-governmental and industry partners dedicated to protecting children from online child sexual exploitation and transnational child sex offences. As part of the collaborative effort by experts who work in this area and/or work closely with individuals who are exposed to online child sexual exploitation materials (CSEM) as part of their duties, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) on behalf of the VGT, embarked on a study that explored the unique nature of working in the area of online child sexual exploitation (OCSE). Recognizing the need to better understand the short- and long-term effects of operational and organizational stressors as well as those more positive effects of working in this area, this study engaged both current and former OCSE employees. The intent of this study was to gain a more fulsome understanding of the stressors, impacts (both positive and negative) and mitigation strategies related to working in the area of OCSE. Through this knowledge and the findings from this study, recommendations for promising practices regarding the health and wellness among OCSE employees were developed.

## Introduction and Overview of Project

This study has three related, yet distinct, phases. The first phase included a comprehensive review and analysis of existing research and literature in regard to exposure to CSEM and employee welfare, and a review of VGT member policies and practices related to psychological health initiatives. This resulted in two distinct literature reviews endorsed by the VGT Board of Management in 2015.

Phase two of this project was informed by the findings of phase one and resulted in this exploratory research study, the results of which are presented in the current report. An online survey was developed and distributed, which sought to collect information relevant to the realities of both current and former employees working (or who had worked) in OCSE units. The survey was distributed to all VGT member agencies and translated from English into five additional languages (French, Arabic, Dutch, German and Spanish). A total of 642 responses were received, including 516 from current employees and 126 from former employees, from 27 different countries as well as from INTERPOL (country was unspecified).

Lastly, the forthcoming and final phase of this project will focus on follow up research (survey and interviews) with current employees to determine the impacts of the promising practices that their unit/agency/organization had implemented. The findings of this phase of the project are intended to inform the development of concrete best practices for OCSE units to support the health and wellness of their employees.

## Analysis and Findings

As a "first-of-its kind" study, this report elaborates on the findings as they relate to several thematic categories of interest. Exploration of the realities of those working in OCSE at the time of this study as well as those who have previously worked in OCSE

units focused on the following areas of interest:

- Job demands (sources that create distress);
- General health outcomes (including specific changes since joining or leaving an OCSE unit);
- Health and wellness policies (beneficial aspects; suggested improvements; and desired components, if no policy was in place);
- Job resources (sources of positive energy); and,
- Personal resources and coping strategies.

## Recommendations for Promising Practices

Literature findings and the evidence presented in the study demonstrate that a number of different variables can contribute to a positive work environment and can help increase employee health and wellbeing. Based on these key findings, recommendations for promising practices have been developed for both current and former employees that fall under three realms of responsibility:

1. Individual-based Initiatives and Strategies to Minimize and Mitigate Stress for OCSE Employees

While the roles and responsibilities of employees working in the area of OCSE may vary, there are many individual strategies and techniques that can be adopted by employees in order to minimize and mitigate some of the potential impacts of their work. At the individual level, current employees can consider implementing various CSEM viewing strategies, seek

psychological/counselling services (either as part of a mandatory psychological assessment or through their own initiative), develop personal coping strategies (such as hobbies and exercise), and/or seek social support. Findings from this study indicated that many participants relied on their co-workers as their main source of support given the common experiences that they share. More specifically to former employees, extending that support to beyond their time within the OCSE unit was recommended, as the impacts of the work may not be truly apparent until after leaving the unit. This was particularly evident through the greater extent of distress experienced from viewing CSEM reported by former employees, in comparison to what was reported by current employees. Interestingly, current employees did not report a great extent of distress from viewing CSEM.

2. Management Initiatives and Strategies to Help Reduce Stress for OCSE Employees

Managers and supervisors play a critical role in both the prevention and management of the potential impacts of work-related stressors. The findings from this study demonstrated that health and wellness policies (including psychological assessments for the duration of the time spent on the unit, in addition to follow-up assessments once an employee leaves the unit), stress management programs and initiatives, appropriately sized teams, optimal work environments and adequate technical equipment, as well as sufficient financial and human resources coupled with a supportive manager are of utmost importance to support current and former OCSE employees.

### 3. Organizational Initiatives and Strategies for Optimal Performance within OCSE Units

These recommendations recognize the role that organizations play in promoting and supporting employee wellbeing. As such, they focus on strategies and initiatives that organizations can adopt in order to enhance the workplace environment. Amongst others, these include adopting a mandatory health and wellness policy, implementing stress management programs and resources, as well as supporting the implementation of mitigation tools and techniques. By focusing on the ways in which organizations can improve the emotional, physical and psychological welfare of their employees, organizations will not only be more effective in safeguarding employees and mitigating various job-specific stressors but work performance will also be enhanced.

The three different areas of recommendations underline the importance of a holistic approach to the health and wellbeing of those working in OCSE units. However, it is recognized that the adoption of these recommendations may be subjective, as they are not to be understood as part of a standardized approach but rather as guidelines for units, managers and agencies to consider.

### Future Research

As this was an exploratory study there are some areas which require additional research in order to enhance the scope of the findings and their applicability more broadly. The suggestions for future research are offered in two realms: I) additional research and assessment of the recommended promising practices offered as part of this phase of the

project and, II) areas of research that require further exploration such as: gaining a better understanding of the impacts on employees' family members; the significance and impacts of knowing the investigative outcomes/results of work; and, whether the integration of positive interactions with children would also make a positive impact on employee wellbeing.

### Concluding Remarks

The findings of this study reaffirmed various observations from available research while shedding light on a number of new discoveries based on the experiential realities of those working in/who have worked in OCSE units.

It is hoped that the findings of this study and the proposed recommendations will inform the ways in which individuals, management and organizations can work towards strengthening the health and wellness policies and practices among VGT member agencies and beyond. However, it is recognized that the suggested recommendations will be evaluated and implemented based on the capacity and circumstances of the country, agency, unit and/or individual. Nevertheless, a united and coordinated approach to safeguarding those working in the area of OCSE will only enhance the collective response of better protecting and serving those who are most vulnerable – our children.

# Section 1. Introduction

## The Virtual Global Taskforce (VGT)

The Virtual Global Taskforce (VGT), established in 2004[1], represents an international alliance dedicated to protecting children from online sexual exploitation and transnational child sex offences. The success of the VGT is largely attributed to the strong international partnerships between the current VGT agencies including law enforcement members[2], industry and non-governmental partners[3,4].

The VGT has created an international psychological network of individuals (hereafter referred to as the VGT Psychological Care Network) who are experts in the area and/or work closely with investigators and other employees[5] who deal with online child sexual exploitation materials (CSEM)[6,7] (for example, psychologists, other health care providers, researchers, and academics). This sub-group of the VGT allows for greater collaboration of research and facilitates the sharing of information in the area of employee health and wellness. The VGT work highlighted in this report draws upon the input of this group.

## Origin of the Project

Police officers are often exposed to operational stressors (for example, traumatic events) and organizational stressors (for example, staff shortages and increase in workload) through their general duty or specific assignments. In light of this, they may experience a range of symptoms in response to these stressors. While there is a

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[1] The founding members of the VGT were the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Australian Federal Police, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (United Kingdom), INTERPOL, and the United States Department of Homeland Security Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

[2] Current VGT law enforcement member countries/agencies include: Australia: Australian Federal Police; Canada: Royal Canadian Mounted Police; Colombia: National Police of Colombia; EUROPOL; INTERPOL; Netherlands: Dutch National Police; New Zealand: New Zealand Police; The Republic of the Philippines: Philippines National Police; Republic of Korea: Korean National Police; Switzerland: Cybercrime Coordination Unit of Switzerland; United Arab Emirates: Ministry of Interior for the United Arab Emirates; United Kingdom: National Crime Agency's Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command; and, United States of America: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations.

[3] Current industry and non-governmental partners include: Child Rescue Coalition (CRC); End Child Prostitution Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes Network (ECPAT); International Association of Internet Hotlines; International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children; International Computer Driving License – Arabia (ICDL- Arabia); International Justice Mission; Magnet Forensics; Microsoft Digital Crimes Unit; National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC); National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC); NetClean; PayPal; Telstra; The Code; Web-IQ; World Vision Australia; and, Ziuz.

[4] Members are voting entities on the Board whereas partners are not.

[5] The literature often refers to employees working in the area of online child sexual exploitation as investigators and/or police officers but several law enforcement agencies are comprised of police officers and civilian members who work together to support operations. Throughout the report, when not referencing specific literature findings, the term "employees" is used to encompass those who work in the area of online child sexual exploitation generally.

[6] The term *child pornography* remains the most frequently used legal term to describe photographic, video, audio, and written material of sexually explicit and abusive depictions of children, depending on country legal frameworks. While it remains to be used within the legal definition of most countries' criminal codes, term *child pornography* allows people to think that it is somehow acceptable and appropriate, like other forms of pornography. Further, it implies consent, which legally and by definition, children cannot provide. *Child sexual abuse material* or *child sexual exploitation material* is considered more appropriate terminology as it accurately reflects the reality of the material (Ste-Marie, Sinclair, Simonovska & Duval, 2016).

[7] While the definition of "child pornography" varies between countries, generally, "child pornography" materials may include a photographic, video, or other visual representation that shows a child who is under the legal age/age of consent and is engaged in or is depicted as engaged in sexual activity. In some countries it may also include written material describing the sexual abuse.

large amount of literature on the stress response of police officers who have experienced trauma stemming from critical incidents (for example, officer-involved shootings)[8], there is less research devoted to various chronic stressors (such as continuous exposure to CSEM), even though these can have significant effects on an employee's physical and psychological well-being. The extent to which online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) employees are impacted by this work (both positive and negative) as well as the successful coping mechanisms used by employees are not well documented.

The members of the VGT recognize the importance of taking care of OCSE employees and understand the importance of hearing their perspectives. Due to the global relevance of this area of research, the VGT Board of Management commissioned the *Health and Wellness International Research Project*, led by the RCMP (SSIS, formerly known as Canadian Police Centre for Missing and Exploited Children/Behavioural Sciences Branch) under the supervision of Dr. Roberta Sinclair and with the support of the VGT Psychological Care Network.

This project has three related, yet distinct, phases:

- Phase One: a comprehensive review and analysis of existing research and literature in regard to exposure to CSEM and employee welfare. The resulting literature review was endorsed by the VGT Board of Management in April 2015. Additionally, a review of VGT

member policies and practices that relates to psychological health initiatives was completed and endorsed by the VGT Board of Management in November 2015[9].

- Phase Two: the second phase was informed by the findings of the first phase and resulted in the development and distribution of an online survey on this topic for employees who are working in or who have worked in OCSE units. The findings from this second phase are presented in this report and inform recommended promising practices to maintain the health and wellness of OCSE employees.

- Phase Three: the third phase (forthcoming) will consist of follow up research (survey, interviews) with current employees to determine impacts of promising practices that they/their agency have implemented. It is important to determine the impact of the strategies/recommendations to ensure their applicability. These findings will help to inform the development of concrete "best practices" for units to support the health and wellness of employees.

The following report focuses on Phase Two and will be used to inform phase three of this project. Please note that reading the report below may cause some reflection, may trigger personal and/or sensitive memories and/or experiences, and may prompt the need to speak to someone. Should you or a colleague experience any symptoms or memory triggers, please do not hesitate to

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[8] For example, refer to Colwell (2005); Stinchcomb (2004); and, Violanti & Aron (1994).
[9] Both VGT reports are available upon request. Please contact the VGT at RCMP.VGT-GIV.GRC@rcmp-grc.gc.ca to request a copy.

contact a health care provider, or speak to a colleague or a trusted superior.

## Introduction to the Survey

The prevalence rate of psychological harm experienced by law enforcement employees who work in OCSE units is not easily quantified due to the complex nature of this line of work and the reality that few studies have been completed. Review of the literature demonstrated that while some research has been completed on employees working in OCSE units specifically, there is still a need to conduct further research to address remaining gaps. As such it was important that an in-depth, global study that examines these issues from the employee's perspective was undertaken (Sinclair, Duval & Quayle, 2015). The intent of this study was to address the existing gaps in the literature and to offer a more fulsome understanding of the impacts (both positive and negative) and potential mitigating strategies that can be achieved.

Informed by findings of Phase One, Phase Two was comprised of primary research – an online survey completed by employees (current and former) of OCSE units internationally. The objective of the research was to gather feedback on the various challenges and stressors that employees encounter, the potential impacts that they have experienced/observed, the positive aspects of their work, and the coping mechanisms that contribute to their resiliency[10]. The findings from the analysis of the survey responses are presented in the

sections below, along with the resulting recommendations for promising practices.

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[10] The American Psychological Association (2014) defines resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress (as cited in Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick & Yehuda, 2014).

# Section 2. Research Methodology

## Research Method

An online survey was developed in consultation with the VGT members and the VGT Psychological Care Network. A purposive sample[11] was used that included current and past employees within the VGT member countries (refer to "Survey Dissemination and Respondents" section for more information on the sample). This research represents the first of its kind in two important areas: 1) providing a global employee perspective; and, 2) engaging former employees to examine the impacts over a longer time period. Former employees represent a wealth of knowledge when considering the longer term impacts that this work can have on employees particularly after they have left a unit. Anecdotally, we have acknowledged that some signs/impacts do not surface until someone has left an OCSE unit, and at times, some impacts can be triggered many years later. It is not only important to take care of our employees while they are within our units, but also throughout the duration of their career, and beyond.

Utilizing an online survey method allowed for a large number of variables to be explored and documented, supported the collection of information about otherwise difficult to measure observational techniques[12], and enabled researchers to gather feedback from a significant number of individuals working in OCSE units (or who had worked in such a unit previously) in various countries.

## Generation of Online Survey Questions

A working group was established to generate the first draft of questions for the survey[13]. The survey questions were largely based on the questions that were used in a 2014 Dutch research study conducted by Impact (the Dutch knowledge and advice center for psychosocial care concerning critical incidents), and commissioned by the Dutch National Police[14]. Some questions were also derived from pre-established scales[15], namely:

1) the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-9 (UWES-9): Schaufeli, W.B. & Bakker, A.B.

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[11] Purposive sampling is a sampling strategy which focuses on a non-probability sample based on the characteristics of the population. The sample is not randomly selected, but rather, is selected intentionally based on certain characteristics (Berg, 2009).

[12] The online survey method facilitated the gathering of information using an indirect observation technique, allowing for the analysis of textual (written) data generated in a natural setting (where in this case, "natural setting" is to be understood as the reactions, reflection and experience of working within the context of an OCSE environment) (Anguera, Portell, Chacón-Moscoso, & Sanduvete-Chaves, 2018). Thus, engaging in indirect observation through an online survey method ensured that the objectives of this research study could be met through unobtrusive means of data collection (limiting researcher reactivity – the response of subjects to the presence of a researcher [Berg, 2009, p. 268]), while also mitigating researcher bias and subjectivity in the assessment of the responses provided by both current and former employees. Given the objectives of this study, the sample of participants would have otherwise been very difficult to achieve, requiring site access and a direct observation role (conducting interviews). This would have been challenging given the international scope of the study.

[13] The group consisted of the following: Dr. Roberta Sinclair (Sensitive and Specialized Investigative Services [SSIS, RCMP]), Kristin Duval (SSIS, RCMP), Mauranne Ste-Marie (nee Brisson) (SSIS, RCMP), Dr. Hans te Brake (Impact, Netherlands), Juul Gouweloos (Impact, Netherlands), and Dr. Ken Middleton (US DHS ICE).

[14] The study was conducted among Dutch police officers investigating (child) sexual assault and child pornography. Gouweloos, J., Te Brake, H., Van der Aa, N., Smit, A., Boelen, P.A., & Kleber, R.J (2018). Wellbeing of police officers investigating sexual assault and child pornography: Job demands, job resources and personal resources. Submitted in: *European Journal of Psychotraumatology.*

[15] Authorization was obtained and licences were purchased to incorporate these scales as required. All associated costs were incurred by the RCMP.

(2006). The Measurement of Work Engagement With a Short Questionnaire: A Cross-National Study. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 66(4),* 701-716.

2) the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS): Schaufeli, W.B., & Bakker, A.B. (2004). Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: a multi-sample study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 25,* 293-315.

3) the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2): Kroenke, K., Spitzer, R.L., & Williams, J.B.W. (2003). The Patient Health Questionnaire-2: validity of a two-item depression screener. *Medical Care, 41(11),* 1284-1292.

4) the Primary Care PTSD Screen (PC-PTSD): Prins, Ouimette, Kimerling, Hugelshofer, Shaw-Hegwer, Thrailkill, Gusman, & Sheikh (2003). The primary care PTSD screen (PC-PTSD): development and operating characteristics. *Primary Care Psychiatry, 9(1),* 9-14.

Once draft questions were established and the online survey was generated using FluidSurvey (under the RCMP's licence), it was shared with the VGT Psychological Care Network and feedback was obtained. All submitted feedback was taken into consideration for the development of the revised questions. Survey questions were approved by numerous subject matter experts involved in this research study, as well as the VGT Board of Advisors and the Board of Management (April 2016).

The survey (drafted in English) was translated into five languages (French, Arabic, Dutch, German and Spanish) at the cost/responsibility of the participating VGT country agency with the content being verified by a subject matter expert in each country.

The survey questions minimized the need to reveal personal information (for example, names) enabling survey responses to remain confidential. Survey data was not traceable back to an individual due to an open survey link (i.e. link was not specific to an individual); therefore, the respondent's identity remained completely protected[16].

## Survey Dissemination and Respondents

The survey was distributed to all VGT participating agencies with the onus on each agency to re-distribute to their domestic partners as needed. For example, in Canada, the survey was disseminated by the RCMP to approximately 60 OCSE units from across the country and to a number of Canadian law enforcement agencies (municipal, provincial/territorial and federal police services, including a number of RCMP detachments). The criterion to participate was that an employee was either currently employed or had been employed within an OCSE unit.

The invitation to participate in the survey was shared via email, and included an open link to the online survey. Participating agencies were encouraged to brief the employees on the study and its purpose. Survey respondents were also provided with a brief introduction to the project at the

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[16] Please contact the VGT at RCMP.VGT-GIV.GRC@rcmp-grc.gc.ca to request a copy of the survey questions used in this study.

beginning of the online survey and were required to consent to the study. Respondents had the opportunity to select the language of their choice (from either English or any of the five [5] aforementioned options).

Survey dissemination was done simultaneously across all countries, in December 2016 concluding on January 31, 2017.

The online survey was disseminated to all eligible employees who were reachable via email. It was recognized that not all previous employees were accessible and reachable, therefore the survey was restricted to employees who maintained contact with members of the unit or were searchable through employee records. The survey was disseminated to all eligible participants of various duties, levels of exposure of CSEM (ranging from no exposure to regular exposure), and years of experience.

## Data Collection

Data was collected through the assistance of the RCMP's Survey Centre. The collected data was stored under the RCMP's licence of FluidSurvey on secure external servers. The data will remain stored for the duration of this project (estimated five (5) years); direct access to the raw data will remain limited to the RCMP Survey Centre Manager and the Statistical Research Advisor (Strategic Policy and Planning Directorate). Access to the complete data set is limited to the researchers.

All participating agencies were required to agree to the release/sharing of data (i.e. data that has been collected from their members) with the project working group, for the purposes of fulfilling the goals and objectives of this project. Once agreed, the RCMP became the rightful owner of the data collected throughout this project. The data will not be used for any other purpose other than the said project, unless otherwise approved by the VGT Board of Management.

All working group members were asked to sign an "undertaking of confidentiality", with precautions taken so that no personal/identifying information was collected, therefore, participants were able to maintain anonymity. Only the participant's country is associated to their response.

## Survey Sample

The sample was comprised of employees working within various police agencies of VGT member countries, as well as, authorized users of INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) Database[17]. The sample was further stratified into former and current employees. Former employees included those who had previously worked, but no longer worked, in OCSE units in any capacity. Current employees included those who were employed in OCSE units at the time of survey distribution. Based on literature and past personal understanding of the issues, it was deemed critical to reach out to past employees, as oftentimes the impacts of this work are not recognized nor do they surface until after an employee has

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[17] The International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) Database is an INTERPOL managed image and video database which allows specialized investigators to share data across the world. Police forces in 63 countries are connected to the ICSE database and cooperate in the identification of child sexual exploitation victims and their abusers (Interpol, 2020).

left the section. This work is unique in this regard and it was anticipated that valuable information would be obtained through their participation. While the purposive sample established the criteria for qualifying respondents, the individual dissemination of surveys was based on a snowball sample[18] and varied across international police agencies. One of the limitations relating to the sample, therefore, is that an exact number of potential participants is not extractable. However, the advantage of reaching a broad number of individuals who would otherwise be unidentifiable and inaccessible outweighs the limitation of having a sample that is not representative of the entire population being studied. The total number of fully completed responses was 642, including 516 from current employees and 126 from former employees. Incomplete surveys[19] were not included in the total count for completed survey responses, nor were their associated responses analyzed/included in the results presented herein. Table 1 presents a breakdown of the survey responses.

**Table 1. Survey Responses**

|  | Complete | Incomplete | Total Responses |
|---|---|---|---|
| Current Employees | 516 | 176 | 692 |
| Former Employees | 126 | 51 | 177 |
| **Total Employees** | **642** | **227** | **869** |

The former and current samples were not merged for the purposes of this study and they remained separate for the purposes of the analysis.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis was completed using a mixed methods approach that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods. The first focused on the use of quantitative methods within Microsoft Excel and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; a statistical analysis software) to calculate mean scores[20] of the quantitative findings and respective standard deviations[21]. More in-depth quantitative analyses were completed by Impact[22] but

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[18] Snowball sampling is an indirect recruitment research method where participants are recruited by other participants rather than researchers (Marcus, Weigelt, Hergert, Gurt, & Gelléri, 2017). There are two types of participants in this sampling: targets and informants (Marcus et al., 2017). The targets are directly recruited by the researchers, asked to provide information, and to recruit other participants (Marcus et al., 2017). In contrast, the informants are recruited informally by other participants rather than the researchers (Waters, 2015). This sampling technique is frequently employed in fields of research with unreachable or hidden populations as a greater reach into the community is possible (Atkinson & Flint, 2001 as cited in Waters, 2015).

[19] These included surveys that had not been formally submitted as "complete" (i.e. status was incomplete). In many of these cases, only the first few questions had been answered. Participants who wished to withdraw at any time could do so by simply not submitting their responses.

[20] The mean score is the average in a data set which is found by adding all numbers in a particular data set and dividing by how many numbers there are (Merriam-Webster, 2020).

[21] Standard deviation is the measure of dispersion of a data set (how spread out a data set is) around the mean (Manikandan, 2011).

[22] Four multivariate ANOVA's were conducted to test whether there was an overall difference between the two groups (former and current employees) regarding their mean scores on: Job Demands, General Health Outcomes, Job Resources and Personal Resources. Where a significant overall difference was found, subsequent univariate analyses were conducted to identify the specific items on which the two groups had significantly different scores. Analysis and interpretation was completed by Juul Gouweloos-Trines, PhD and Hans te Brake, PhD (Knowledge Center Impact – Partner in Arq Psychotrauma Expert Group members).

were beyond the scope of this report and thus, not included. It was of utmost importance that the methods of analysis used herein were similar to those employed by the Dutch research group, such that previously explored data and the resulting findings could be compared to the present study. The second data analysis method involved qualitative content analysis, which is described in further detail below.

## Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was conducted in order to explore the open-ended questions of the survey to supplement the findings of the quantitative analysis, as well as to explore variability among the experiences of those who are currently or have previously worked in the area of online child sexual exploitation. This method allowed for an exploration of thematic observations based on the experiences that were noted in the open-ended questions and responses.

This analysis used a mix of both deductive and inductive approaches. First, the main themes were generated deductively through the use of the existing section-specific themes that guided the questions of the survey. Further, coding categories were created through an inductive approach that emerged from the data itself. Finally, specific codes emerged from further breakdown of the responses themselves, which allowed for a more specific analysis of the types of responses that were noted. Qualitative content analysis proved very helpful for the analysis of the large amount of data that was

easily organized into categories, simplifying the analysis process.

## Categories of Analysis

The main thematic breakdown was established based on the questions that guided the sections of the survey. These included thematic sections that focused on job demands that caused distress, general health outcomes, health and wellness policies, job resources/sources of positive energy, personal resources/coping strategies, and working environment factors that alleviate stress. It also included current employee-specific questions such as changes since joining the OCSE unit, and former employee-specific questions such as changes since leaving the OCSE unit. The focus of creating thematic guiding sections was to observe the response texts in a manageable way with the objective of uncovering general themes and patterns acknowledged and experienced by employees in this line of work.

Data was sorted in categories based on the general themes. For example, in the theme of "job resources/sources of positive energy", categories included OCSE work-related (field), organization/unit-related, and self-initiated. While the development of the categories allowed for further stratification of the responses, individual codes were also created in order to capture the variance in the responses based on individual experiences. The responses were coded based on the general theme, general coding category and the corresponding code[23].

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[23] When conducting research, a 'code' is "most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative . . . essence-capturing . . . attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldana, 2009, p. 14). In order to examine responses from

## Units of Analysis

The units of analysis were used to distinguish patterns. To detect distinguished patterns, themes and remarks were taken from the provided qualitative responses. The intent was to extract the meaning from the statements made by both former and current employees, to allow for the latent meaning[24] to be observed and to gain additional insight into the experiences of study participants. Essentially, the focus remained on the concepts that were discussed within the deductively extracted themes. The goal was not to quantify how many times a response was stated, but rather, to understand how employees explained their experiences as it related to the specific questions they were asked[25].

## Methodological Limitations

As with all research, there are a few methodological limitations of the current study that should be noted. A limitation specific to the research method was the use of the snowball sample[26] approach, which resulted in an inability to determine the size and demographics of the total population to which the survey was disseminated. The sample of former employees for example was limited to those who maintained contact with their previous OCSE manager or colleagues, or in some cases, could be

accessed through employee records. As a result of the approach used, the generalizability of the findings may have been impacted. However, it must be noted that this study was not intended to provide conclusive evidence, but rather, to offer exploratory findings in order to establish a better understanding of the impacts (both positive and negative) of working in OCSE units, offering insight into the various stressors experienced and the ways in which stress can be mitigated through the development of recommended promising practices.

It is recognized that while surveys offer a range of advantages (such as those described above in the *Research Method* section), they can only provide estimates and assumptions about the true population, limiting the extent to which the information and results obtained through the study can be generalized beyond the tested sample. More specifically, the results reported herein are based on the responses provided by those who completed the survey, who represent a subset of all OCSE employees (and former employees). It is not known how representative that sample may be (for example, there could be a certain demographic of employees that was more likely to respond to the request to complete a survey, or were more accessible/available

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participants, key words and phrases are extracted from their responses to identify potential key themes. A code is also a way that a researcher can "summarize or condense data", as opposed to reducing it (Saldana, 2009, p. 15).

[24] According to Braun and Clark (2006), latent content is defined as identifying or examining the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations and ideologies that are theorized as shaping or informing the manifest meaning of the data (i.e., the underlying meaning of the themes) (p. 84).

[25] It is important to note that although the focus was not on counting how many times a response was stated, quantifying the responses was the approach used for the creation of generalized thematic observations.

[26] The survey dissemination was based on a purposive sample which included all qualifying agency participants. However, once the surveys were disseminated to the VGT member agencies, the primary agency representative further disseminated the surveys utilizing a snowball sample approach in order to reach as many individual participants as possible.

to complete the survey, thereby skewing the results).

Additionally, a potential limitation of assessing the findings qualitatively was researcher bias. This limitation was mitigated by the implementation and practice of reflexivity[27] throughout the study. This was accomplished through becoming immersed in the available literature and relevant policy documentation, by reading the reported results numerous times, and by continuously reflecting on the unique knowledge and understanding of the OCSE working environment.

The collection of multi-language responses should also be considered to be a limitation of the study. Non-English responses were translated to English for the purpose of data analysis, however it is recognized that there may have been some inconsistencies with how responses were translated across the various languages. There is also a risk that the meaning of the response was altered or misinterpreted during translation. However, to address this limitation, each country was responsible for their own translation and reviewed the English translation afterwards to ensure that the meaning was intact. Regardless of the limitations, this study provides a first international collation of employee (current and former) perspectives on the impacts (negative and positive) of working in this area as well as identifies potential mitigating strategies in this field of policing.

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[27] The practice of reflexivity refers to the researcher's understanding and awareness of their own role in the social world(s) that they are studying and the potential limitations that may stem from their bias, understanding and/or direct involvement/knowledge of the population or data being studied (Berg, 2009).

# Section 3. Results & Discussion

A mixed methodology was used in the analysis of the findings and has been supplemented by available literature. The *Results and Discussion* section also features direct relevant quotes from the respondents of the survey. The quotes have not been altered and anonymity has been maintained in order to respect the confidentiality agreements with the participants of this study.

## Demographics

The sample of participants included employees who were working in an OCSE unit at the time of the study and employees who had formerly worked in an OCSE unit. Participants who completed the survey were from a total of 27 different countries or from INTERPOL (country was unspecified). Both current and former employees had varying years of experience in policing/years of experience working for a police agency, and in an OCSE unit. Demographic information was also collected on sex, age (at time of study), marital status, children, category of employment, position of employment, area of specialization, exposure to and amount of time viewing CSEM within one's shift. A breakdown of the sample in terms of these variables is reported in Table 2.

The findings demonstrate that most participants were married (72.2% of current employees and 78.6% of former employees), were most likely to fall within the age range of 31-50 years old, were police officers/sworn peace officers (72.1% of current employees and 77.0% of former

employees) engaged in (or had engaged) in general investigations (70.1% of current employees and 73.4% of former employees) and had been exposed to CSEM as part of their regularly assigned tasks (87.4% of current employees and 94.4% of former employees), most commonly spending (or spent) between 0-50% of their shifts viewing CSEM. A wide range of years of experience in policing and in an OCSE unit was observed, and males were slightly more represented within the sample (64.9% of current employees were male while 54.8% of former employees were male). The extent to which this breakdown of variables is representative of the true population is unknown.

## Table 2. Demographics – Current and Former Employees

| Demographic Variables | | Current | Former |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Percentage of responses (%)[28] | |
| Country | United States | 34.4% | 18.3% |
| | Canada | 18.5% | 29.4% |
| | Australia | 10.1% | 37.3% |
| | United Kingdom | 6.6% | 4.0% |
| | Switzerland | 5.3% | 1.6% |
| | United Arab Emirates | 3.9% | 0.8% |
| | Colombia | 2.9% | 3.2% |
| | Denmark | 1.8% | 3.2% |
| | Germany | 1.6% | 0.0% |
| | France | 1.2% | 0.0% |
| | Other | 5.1% | 0.0% |
| Sex | Male | 64.9% | 54.8% |
| | Female | 35.1% | 45.2% |
| Current age | Under 25 years old | 1.6% | 0.0% |
| | 26-30 | 8.0% | 5.6% |
| | 31-35 | 16.9% | 12.7% |
| | 36-40 | 23.9% | 22.2% |
| | 41-45 | 19.8% | 23.0% |
| | 46-50 | 17.3% | 13.5% |
| | 51-55 | 7.2% | 14.3% |
| | Over 55 | 5.3% | 8.7% |
| Marital status | Married/common law | 72.2% | 78.6% |
| | Single | 11.4% | 11.9% |
| | Dating/in a relationship | 11.2% | 2.4% |
| | Divorced | 5.3% | 7.1% |
| Children under 18 | Yes | 55.5% | 51.2% |
| | No | 44.5% | 48.8% |
| Years of Police Experience | Less than 5 years | 10.2% | 1.6% |
| | 5-10 years | 20.9% | 19.4% |
| | 11-15 years | 23.7% | 24.2% |
| | 16-20 years | 19.2% | 22.6% |
| | 21-25 years | 11.2% | 12.9% |
| | 26-30 years | 9.4% | 8.1% |
| | Over 30 years | 5.5% | 11.3% |
| Category of Employment | Sworn Peace Officer/Police Officer | 72.1% | 77.0% |
| | Civilian Member | 9.2% | 4.0% |
| | Public Servant | 8.8% | 8.7% |
| | Unsworn employee | 3.3% | 4.8% |
| | Other | 6.6% | 5.6% |

| Demographic Variables | | Current | Former |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Percentage of responses (%) | |
| Years of Experience in ICE | Less than 1 year | 11.7% | 12.9% |
| | 1-2 Years | 20.8% | 21.0% |
| | 3-4 Years | 22.8% | 34.7% |
| | 5-7 Years | 18.5% | 20.2% |
| | 8-10 Years | 10.9% | 4.8% |
| | Over 10 years | 15.4% | 6.5% |
| Primary position of employment | Line officer/agent | 27.4% | 33.9% |
| | ICE/CPO Investigator/Detective | 23.3% | 13.7% |
| | Forensics/Digital and/or IT Forensics | 14.4% | 5.6% |
| | First-line Supervisor | 12.8% | 3.2% |
| | Researcher | 7.2% | 3.2% |
| | Senior management | 4.1% | 7.3% |
| | Technology Support | 1.7% | 0.8% |
| | Administrative | 0.2% | 25.0% |
| | Other | 8.9% | 7.3% |
| Area of Specialization | General investigation | 70.1% | 73.4% |
| | Support Services | 30.1% | 16.9% |
| | Victim identification | 26.6% | 13.7% |
| | Triage | 22.5% | 22.6% |
| | Undercover Operations | 21.4% | 21.0% |
| | Other | 10.5% | 8.9% |
| Exposed to CSEM as part of tasks | Yes | 87.4% | 94.4% |
| | No | 12.6% | 5.6% |
| Percentage of shift viewing CSEM | 0-25% | 62.7% | 44.4% |
| | 26-50% | 21.0% | 33.3% |
| | 51-75% | 11.7% | 14.8% |
| | 76-100% | 4.6% | 7.4% |

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[28] Percentage values were calculated based on the number of responses ("counts") for the variable divided by the total number of responses submitted for that respective variable.

## Job Demands (Sources that Create Distress)

### Current Employees

Employees who were working in OCSE units at the time of the study were asked to identify the extent to which various job demands (from a pre-established list) created distress when reflecting on the preceding 6-8 weeks. A scale from 0 ("not at all") to 4 ("to a very great extent") was used. Employees could also indicate "not applicable" if they were not exposed to a particular job demand as part of their regular duties. Based on the five highest mean values, the job demands that created the most distress for current employees were: work pressure, inadequate resources,

policies and procedures, the learning curve when they joined the unit, and not having the proper tools and equipment at the work place (poor work facilities). Refer to Table 3 for a breakdown of responses by percentage value, mean scores, standard deviations, and the total number of responses for each job demand category for current employees.

> *"…There is a tremendous learning curve for those who do choose the work. We notice it is 18-24 months to get a 'new' investigator up to speed. The opportunity for career advancement within the unit should exist for members who wish to continue in this type of work."*

**Table 3. Job Demands of Current Employees.**

| In the last 6-8 weeks, to what extent did you feel distressed from: | Scale (0 = Not at all; 4 = To a great extent) Percentage of responses (%)[29] | | | | | N/A | MEAN | SD | # responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | | | |
| Work pressure | 13.2% | 21.0% | 34.4% | 22.1% | 9.3% | 0.0% | 1.93 | 1.15 | 515 |
| Inadequate resources | 21.9% | 24.4% | 21.1% | 17.2% | 15.4% | 0.0% | 1.80 | 1.37 | 512 |
| Policies and procedures | 26.2% | 31.1% | 24.9% | 12.9% | 4.9% | 0.0% | 1.39 | 1.15 | 511 |
| Learning curve when joined the unit | 29.0% | 30.0% | 18.9% | 11.1% | 5.4% | 5.6% | 1.30 | 1.19 | 514 |
| Poor work facilities | 35.3% | 24.2% | 22.0% | 12.9% | 5.7% | 0.0% | 1.29 | 1.23 | 513 |
| Exposure to material | 31.4% | 34.2% | 16.8% | 6.1% | 4.9% | 6.6% | 1.13 | 1.11 | 512 |
| Ongoing learning curve (if at unit for more than 6 months) | 35.3% | 25.3% | 18.8% | 7.5% | 3.7% | 9.4% | 1.11 | 1.13 | 510 |
| Difficulty maintaining a home and work balance | 40.2% | 27.3% | 20.1% | 9.6% | 2.9% | 0.0% | 1.08 | 1.12 | 513 |
| Unit/agency reorganization and/or restructuring | 47.9% | 22.0% | 13.2% | 10.1% | 6.8% | 0.0% | 1.06 | 1.28 | 514 |
| Difficult relationships with other departments within own agency | 43.2% | 30.7% | 15.8% | 6.4% | 3.9% | 0.0% | 0.97 | 1.10 | 512 |
| Difficult relationships with external partners | 42.5% | 33.3% | 16.4% | 4.9% | 2.9% | 0.0% | 0.92 | 1.02 | 513 |
| Difficulties with colleagues | 46.8% | 29.2% | 15.2% | 4.9% | 3.9% | 0.0% | 0.90 | 1.08 | 513 |
| Contact with victims | 31.6% | 13.1% | 6.7% | 2.7% | 1.8% | 44.1% | 0.75 | 1.05 | 510 |
| Identifying with a victim | 39.5% | 15.3% | 9.2% | 2.0% | 2.0% | 32.1% | 0.70 | 1.00 | 511 |
| Interacting with family of an offender | 34.2% | 13.1% | 9.4% | 2.2% | 0.8% | 40.3% | 0.70 | 0.95 | 511 |
| Difficult relationship with supervisor | 65.6% | 17.7% | 8.6% | 4.9% | 3.3% | 0.0% | 0.63 | 1.05 | 514 |
| Contact with offenders | 40.8% | 16.2% | 7.2% | 2.5% | 1.0% | 32.2% | 0.62 | 0.92 | 512 |

[29] Percentage values were calculated based on the number of responses ("counts") for the scale value divided by the total number of responses submitted for that respective job demand.

Survey respondents were also asked to list additional job demands that created distress via open-ended questions. Inadequate equipment (IT) and tools were an expressed concern, reinforcing the results above in Table 3, where 'poor work facilities' was one of the top five distressing job demands. One respondent noted, *"the area I feel most stressed about is not having the proper tools (evolving technology) to be able to target child sexual exploitation to the best of our abilities."*

Another component that was frequently identified as creating distress was a lack of professional development and training opportunities. Many respondents highlighted that investigating and working within the area of OCSE requires specialized skills. Due to the continuously evolving landscape (new technologies being released on a regular basis, for example), training and development is critical in order to remain up-to-date with new trends, technology, investigative tools, and techniques. If training is lacking, one may feel unprepared to do the work. As one survey respondent noted, *"training in this work area is very sparse especially in [agency name]. More effort should be placed on training and getting people ready for the tasks given. Without this, staff do not feel ready or confident for what lies ahead."*

Relatedly, some respondents who identified a lack of training also mentioned that they perceived a lack of support from management to pursue these training opportunities, and/or that their managers did not recognize or understand the importance of ongoing training and development and the impacts that this has

on doing the job properly. In the words of one respondent, *"my supervisors do not understand the amount of training required in the ongoing change of technology and computer software to successfully accomplish my work."* Interestingly, as reported in Table 3, little distress was caused by a difficult relationship with one's supervisor, despite some employees reporting a lack of support for training by their supervisor.

Further, some respondents indicated that they felt distressed from managing or meeting internal expectations (i.e. from supervisors or the agency). Much of the work pressure that employees reported were related to heavy caseloads, lack of human resources, the pressure to perform, and insufficient time to conduct quality work. This is consistent with what was observed in the quantitative findings from Table 3, where work pressure and inadequate resources were the top two distressing job demands. Past studies have also identified workload as a major stressor for many investigators (Bokelberg, n.d.; Te Brake, Gouweloos & Lesger, 2014; Wortley, Smallbone, Powell & Cassematis, 2014).

Other job-related demands that caused distress included a lack of understanding of OCSE work by other units or employees within the organization and specific CSEM related tasks (for example, the severity of abuse depicted, categorization of material, and hours spent viewing). Generally, exposure to CSEM was not identified as one of the more distressing aspects of the work

(refer to Table 3)[30]. The literature presented mixed findings on this aspect of work, but there are some studies that have reported that viewing CSEM was not perceived to be a major stressor or a considerably traumatic aspect of investigations (Burns, Morley, Bradshaw, & Domene, 2008; Powell, Cassematis, Benson, Smallbone & Wortley, 2014b; Tomyn, Powell, Cassematis, Smallbone & Wortley, 2015).

Frustrations were also expressed toward the criminal justice system. More specifically, the perception that there were lenient prosecutors, inadequate sentencing, and inconsistency within the judiciary system in how they handle online child sexual exploitation cases were shared. For example, one respondent expressed a *"frustration with [the] legal system and inferior sentencing for child sexual offenders in this jurisdiction,"* while another noted that s/he was distressed due to *"the rights of an offender. For me it seems like the rights of an offender is much more important than the right of a victim. For me that is very inconceivable."*

The above quotes lend support for the need to employ an adequate approach that ensures that the rights of the victims are prioritized instead of gleaning over the harm that this crime type perpetuates to those who are victimized by it, by prioritizing the rights of the offenders, having disproportionate sentences, or reliance by the courts and legal counsel for descriptions of the offensive material rather than factual viewing of it.

## Former Employees

Employees who had previously worked in OCSE units were asked to identify the extent to which they felt distressed due to various job demands (from a pre-established list) while at the unit, using a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 4 ("to a very great extent"), or by indicating "not applicable." Based on the five highest mean values, former employees were the most distressed from: work pressure, inadequate resources, exposure to the material, policies and procedures and difficulty maintaining a home and work balance. The top two most distressing job demands (work pressure and inadequate resources) were the same as those identified by current employees, and had similar mean scores between each employee sample. Refer to Table 4 for a breakdown of responses from former employees.

One notable difference between the two samples was exposure to material. Former employees reported that they felt a greater extent of distress from viewing material when reflecting back on their time at the unit (mean value of 1.93) compared to current employees (mean value of 1.13). This suggests that the effects of exposure may only become truly apparent after leaving the unit, while reflecting back on the stressor. Of note, in a study by Burns (2007), investigators reported being upset, shocked, horrified, and repulsed by material they viewed up to a year afterwards (Burns, 2007). Additionally, studies have shown that

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[30] This finding must be contextualized within the reality that the imagery may be impacting employees at a level that is not recognized by them. In other words, the impacts of the materials may manifest themselves in ways the employees do not realize. This is an area that is in need of further research to discern the underlying impacts of this type of material. Perception versus reality may be two different issues.

psychological impacts including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; or more specifically, in the case of OCSE employees, Secondary Traumatic Stress[31]) can unfold over time, long after the triggering incident(s). It can be months or even years before symptoms appear, and/or by the time the impact is recognized and addressed. In the words of one former employee,

> while immersed in the work I didn't feel a thing but behave unlike myself most specifically with my now ex-husband...I was in denial...I've been out for 5 yrs now and I suffer from anxiety, it all came to hit me at once...I lost my marriage, felt depressed and hit the biggest wall of my life...I'm better now but it took 3-4 yrs to recover.

McFarlane (2010) referred to "delayed onset PTSD" to describe how PTSD can remain dormant within an individual, only to resurface at some point in the future. However, what causes the PTSD to emerge may be a combination of factors that often are individual to one's self, and it is an area that is understudied and therefore remains unclear. Of note, McFarlane (2010) also acknowledged how repeated exposure to trauma (and the accumulation of multiple traumatic events) can increase the risk of an individual developing PTSD. In the context of OCSE work, this relates to the continued exposure to CSEM.

> *"I don't think you really know until you leave the unit what affect it really has on you. While this is the most satisfying work and we have such an amazing opportunity to save children from a life of sexual abuse, I am deeply affected now that I have left. I can't look at some pictures of my own grandchildren, everyone with a child is an offender. There is a lot of self talk to stop this thinking. Most members don't want to talk to you about this job, so you're on your own.*

It is also important to note the difference between how the question was asked to/between each sample. Current employees were to only consider the preceding 6-8 weeks, while former employees were asked to reflect on "while they were at the unit." This also limits the extent to which the findings can be compared.

In terms of additional job demands that caused distress, former employees frequently identified: poor management support/oversight and unrealistic internal expectations (for example, related to workload). As such, previous findings from literature that found that distress arises when supervisors lack an informed understanding of the nature and realities of OCSE work remain relevant (Te Brake et al., 2014). In many cases, former employees took the opportunity to re-emphasize the distress that was caused from a lack of training, poor work facilities/equipment, work pressure,

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[31] Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is a state of heightened anxiety and tension, and the preoccupation with someone else's suffering. Symptoms are similar to those of PTSD but develop as a result of indirect exposure to traumatic material or events, and has been reported amongst OCSE units (Krause, 2009; Bourke and Craun, 2013; Te Brake et al., 2014).

and inadequate resources. As one former employee noted,

> *I had no problem with the child exploitation material however, as the work load increased, restraints due to resources, and extensive hours you felt you had to do on a voluntary basis to get the stats was taxing and chipped away at my health. It was almost as if it broke down my hard shell and I was an emotional whirlwind of adrenaline and couldn't shut down all of a sudden. 7 years working on numerous National and Provincial ICE operations and overwhelming amount of new investigations coming in almost daily, there was no end or catching up in sight.*

**Table 4. Job Demands of Former Employees.**

| While you were at the unit, to what extent did you feel distressed from: | Scale (0 = Not at all; 4 = To a great extent) Percentage of responses (%)[32] | | | | | N/A | MEAN | SD | # responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **0** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | | | | |
| Work pressure | 8.7% | 20.6% | 38.1% | 21.4% | 11.1% | 0.0% | 2.06 | 1.10 | 126 |
| Inadequate resources | 12.7% | 27.8% | 22.2% | 22.2% | 15.1% | 0.0% | 1.99 | 1.27 | 126 |
| Exposure to material | 9.5% | 25.4% | 35.7% | 16.7% | 10.3% | 2.4% | 1.93 | 1.12 | 126 |
| Policies and procedures | 16.1% | 35.5% | 29.8% | 14.5% | 4.0% | 0.0% | 1.55 | 1.05 | 124 |
| Difficulty maintaining a home and work balance | 32.8% | 26.4% | 18.4% | 12.0% | 10.4% | 0.0% | 1.41 | 1.33 | 125 |
| Poor work facilities | 25.4% | 34.9% | 24.6% | 10.3% | 4.8% | 0.0% | 1.34 | 1.11 | 126 |
| Unit/agency reorganization and/or restructuring | 36.0% | 24.8% | 18.4% | 16.0% | 4.8% | 0.0% | 1.29 | 1.24 | 125 |
| Contact with victims | 14.3% | 27.0% | 13.5% | 6.3% | 1.6% | 37.3% | 1.27 | 1.01 | 126 |
| Learning curve when joined the unit | 28.8% | 32.0% | 20.8% | 8.0% | 3.2% | 7.2% | 1.19 | 1.08 | 125 |
| Identifying with a victim | 26.2% | 21.4% | 16.7% | 8.7% | 1.6% | 25.4% | 1.17 | 1.10 | 126 |
| Difficulties with colleagues | 41.9% | 25.0% | 16.9% | 9.7% | 6.5% | 0.0% | 1.14 | 1.25 | 124 |
| Difficult relationships with external partners | 29.0% | 39.5% | 22.6% | 6.5% | 2.4% | 0.0% | 1.14 | 0.99 | 124 |
| Difficult relationships with other departments within own agency | 34.7% | 32.3% | 22.6% | 7.3% | 3.2% | 0.0% | 1.12 | 1.07 | 124 |
| Interacting with family of an offender | 24.2% | 23.4% | 14.5% | 4.8% | 2.4% | 30.6% | 1.10 | 1.07 | 124 |
| Difficult relationship with supervisor | 46.4% | 17.6% | 23.2% | 5.6% | 7.2% | 0.0% | 1.10 | 1.25 | 125 |
| Contact with offenders | 33.3% | 18.3% | 15.1% | 1.6% | 2.4% | 29.4% | 0.89 | 1.04 | 126 |
| Ongoing learning curve (after at unit for more than 6 months) | 40.0% | 31.2% | 14.4% | 2.4% | 2.4% | 9.6% | 0.85 | 0.97 | 125 |

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[32] Percentage values were calculated based on the number of responses ("counts") for the scale value divided by the total number of responses submitted for that respective job demand.

## General Health Outcomes

### Current Employees

Employees who were working in OCSE units at the time of the study were asked to identify the extent to which they felt they suffered from various health-related outcomes (from a pre-established list) when reflecting on the preceding 6-8 weeks, using a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 4 ("to a very great extent"). Based on the five highest mean values, current employees reported to suffer the most from: a negative world view, overly protective behaviour toward their family and children, physical ailments, insomnia or increased sleeping patterns, and a desire to change assignments or specific task. Refer to Table 5 for a breakdown of responses for current employees.

Generally, most employees working within OCSE units felt that they did not suffer from negative health outcomes to any great extent. In fact, only the top three outcomes had a mean value between 1.0 and 1.5 (which falls between "to a small extent" and "to some extent"), with the remaining outcomes (mean values) falling under 1.0. These findings are consistent with what has been previously reported in several studies, that generally employees are coping with working in OCSE relatively well (Bokelberg, n.d.; Perez, Jones, Englert, & Sachau, 2010; Powell, Cassematis, Benson, Smallbone, & Wortley, 2014a; Wolak & Mitchell, 2009).

## Table 5. Negative Outcomes of Work of Current Employees

| In the last 6-8 weeks, to what extent did you suffer from: | Scale (0 = Not at all; 4 = To a great extent) Percentage of responses (%)[33] | | | | | MEAN | SD | # responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | | |
| Negative world view | 26.6% | 29.4% | 25.0% | 13.7% | 5.3% | 1.42 | 1.17 | 511 |
| Overly protective behaviour towards family and children | 39.2% | 22.8% | 20.9% | 11.5% | 5.7% | 1.22 | 1.24 | 513 |
| Physical ailments | 40.1% | 29.4% | 19.5% | 8.6% | 2.5% | 1.04 | 1.08 | 514 |
| Insomnia or increased sleeping patterns | 55.8% | 22.4% | 11.9% | 7.4% | 2.5% | 0.78 | 1.08 | 514 |
| A desire to change assignments or specific task | 62.1% | 18.8% | 11.3% | 5.4% | 2.3% | 0.67 | 1.03 | 515 |
| Personal inability to take desired leave | 61.0% | 19.0% | 13.8% | 4.9% | 1.4% | 0.67 | 0.98 | 515 |
| Changes in sexual activity | 63.9% | 17.9% | 12.8% | 3.5% | 1.9% | 0.62 | 0.97 | 515 |
| Psychological ailments | 64.1% | 20.1% | 10.0% | 4.1% | 1.8% | 0.59 | 0.95 | 512 |
| Cognitive impairments | 73.2% | 15.9% | 7.6% | 2.7% | 0.6% | 0.42 | 0.79 | 511 |
| Increased use of alcohol, drugs or medications | 75.7% | 16.3% | 5.3% | 1.4% | 1.4% | 0.36 | 0.76 | 514 |
| Diminished comfort level around children | 77.7% | 16.6% | 3.9% | 1.6% | 0.2% | 0.30 | 0.64 | 512 |
| Involuntary feelings of desire or arousal | 88.7% | 9.7% | 0.8% | 0.6% | 0.2% | 0.14 | 0.44 | 515 |

[33] Percentage values were calculated based on the number of responses ("counts") for the scale value divided by the total number of responses submitted for that respective outcome.

Some respondents specified the conditions and/or symptoms that they experienced, which primarily included physical or emotional symptoms such as anger, frustration (often due to the lack of understanding and/or awareness of this crime type by others), irritability, feeling overwhelmed, fatigued/exhaustion, and a loss of motivation. One respondent expressed his/her *"difficulty relating to people who suffer from minor mishaps in their lives and they talk about it like it is the end of the world, considering what we see happening in the world."*

> *"I get irritable at my family sometimes when I've had a difficult day at work. I know its not rational but when we sit down for dinner each night and talk about our day, I get annoyed at how crap my day has been when everyone else has had a good day."*

Some also re-emphasized their cynicism and skepticism, consistent with the above findings reported in the table (negative world view). Others noted the occurrence of flashbacks or unexpected memories re-surfacing. For example, one participant noted the re-surfacing of *"unwanted negative memories when children do benign activities like running around, climbing in bed, or playing that can trigger a memory of a certain scene from a picture or video. These are quick and can be shaken off almost immediately."*

> *"Hyper-awareness when children are around. I initially suspect men of abusing children when children sit on their laps or they show affection to a child."*

### Changes Since Joining OCSE Unit

Current employees were also asked if they had noticed any changes in themselves since joining the OCSE unit. This question allowed for respondents to reflect on their entire time within the unit, rather than only focussing on the preceding 6-8 weeks, as was the case above[34]. Of the 375 participants who responded to the question, 39.7% (149/375) indicated that they had not noticed any changes in themselves, while 60.3% (226/375) had noticed change(s) since joining the unit. This observation has to be viewed with caution as some of the available literature underscores that oftentimes the changes in behaviour, attitude or changes in one's self generally become more apparent to colleagues or friends and family before they become apparent to one's self (Burns et al., 2008; Powell et al., 2015, p. 107). This is also another reason why some agencies are moving toward mandatory psychological assessments, which is discussed at a later point in this paper.

Of the 226 employees who had noticed a change, some elaborated on their experience and observations. Most commonly, changes were related to effects on personal life and included becoming cynical/skeptical, becoming more cautious or overprotective of

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[34] Questions that focussed on a 6-8 week timeframe were consistent with the original Dutch survey. This question ("changes since joining the OCSE unit") was a unique question which encouraged respondents to reflect beyond the most immediate past and offered an opportunity to provide insight on their entire working experience within the OCSE unit.

their children (or other people's children), and having a negative world view.

These changes could be explained as the result of vicarious traumatization, which involves "internal changes in core beliefs, identity, needs and wants, relationships, and view of others" (Krause, 2009, p. 24), and has been noted within several studies as one of the impacts of working within OCSE units (Bulmer, 2010; Burns, 2007; Whelpton, 2012; Wolak & Mitchell, 2009).

> *"When a child screams at the grocery store, I hear abuse. When I think of natural disasters, I think of children being sexually exploited for survival. When I see poor families, I think of the abuse this child may be experiencing. I am much more aware of the prevalence of this crime and as a result, see this crime everywhere I go."*

Some participants indicated that they no longer only see innocence when looking at a child, but are now also confronted by what could happen to them, how they could be harmed. In the words on one respondent, *"when I see children for example at events or at the playground, I no longer see only carefree children, but also think about the danger to them and what certain groups of people, such as paedophiles, do to them."* For others, they find it difficult to set aside child sexual abuse, as it randomly pops into their minds during everyday scenarios.

Some participants took the opportunity to note a positive change in themselves since joining the OCSE unit. Most commonly, these changes included increased motivation (i.e.

to work harder), greater confidence in their work, more empathetic and open minded, and feeling proud of the work being done. One respondent shared that *"I am happier in this role and feel that I am contributing to our communities by doing this type of work, it is very rewarding."* Managers and supervisors play an important role in promoting and encouraging this positive thinking, which can be done through celebrating the team successes while keeping in tune with and understanding employee needs.

> *"I am extremely proud of my work and our team's accomplishments. My work is gratifying. With time, I was able to create a little barrier to protect myself enough not to be 'affected' by the images that we see, but that also leave me sensitive and empathetic towards victims and their families."*

These findings are consistent with the literature, which reports that investigators have a sense of accomplishment and find great satisfaction in their work (Bourke & Craun, 2013; Bulmer, 2010; Burns et al., 2008; Perez et al., 2010; Whelpton, 2012; Wolak & Mitchell, 2009). Despite the various stressors that employees may encounter while working in an OCSE unit, employees are generally coping well, and the positive aspects and outcomes are becoming more apparent. This will be an important area of research to concentrate on as we learn more about the positives so we can ensure we are promoting the environment for these feelings to flourish.

### Former Employees

Employees who previously worked in OCSE units were asked to identify the extent to which they felt they suffered from various health-related outcomes (from a pre-established list) while they were at the unit, using a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 4 ("to a very great extent"). Based on the five highest mean values, former employees reported to suffer the most from: a negative world view, overly protective behaviour toward their family and children, changes in sexual activity, insomnia or increased sleeping patterns, and psychological ailments. Physical ailments also had a comparatively similar mean score (in reference to psychological ailments), as the sixth highest. Refer to Table 6 for a breakdown of responses for former employees.

One difference that is important to note was the overall higher mean scores reported by

former employees. Once again, this may suggest that the impacts of working in an OCSE unit may only become apparent once an employee leaves, as proposed in the literature (Edelmann, 2010, for example). However, the longer term and retrospective impacts are not well understood. Future research in the form of a longitudinal study would offer greater insight into how employees perceive stressors while working within the unit, and if/how that might change once they leave.

The top two ranked negative outcomes (negative world view and overly protective behaviour) were the same two highest negative outcomes identified by current employees. This suggests that these particular changes remain within individuals for some time after they leave the unit, and thus require greater focus and attention in order to minimize the extent of this longer term impact (through additional research, for example).

**Table 6. Negative Outcomes of Work of Former Employees.**

| While you were at the unit, to what extent did you suffer from: | Scale (0 = Not at all; 4 = To a great extent) Percentage of responses (%)[35] | | | | | MEAN | SD | # responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | | |
| Negative world view | 15.1% | 17.5% | 29.4% | 21.4% | 16.7% | 2.07 | 1.29 | 126 |
| Overly protective behaviour towards family and children | 18.3% | 19.0% | 23.0% | 19.0% | 20.6% | 2.05 | 1.40 | 126 |
| Changes in sexual activity | 52.4% | 15.9% | 15.1% | 9.5% | 7.1% | 1.03 | 1.31 | 126 |
| Insomnia or increased sleeping patterns | 48.4% | 22.2% | 13.5% | 11.1% | 4.8% | 1.02 | 1.23 | 126 |
| Psychological ailments | 51.6% | 21.4% | 11.9% | 10.3% | 4.8% | 0.95 | 1.22 | 126 |
| Physical ailments | 44.4% | 23.8% | 25.4% | 6.3% | 0.0% | 0.94 | 0.98 | 126 |
| Diminished comfort level around children | 56.3% | 19.0% | 11.1% | 9.5% | 4.0% | 0.86 | 1.18 | 126 |
| A desire to change assignments or specific task | 58.4% | 17.6% | 15.2% | 2.4% | 6.4% | 0.81 | 1.18 | 125 |
| Personal inability to take desired leave | 61.6% | 14.4% | 9.6% | 11.2% | 3.2% | 0.80 | 1.19 | 125 |
| Cognitive impairments | 67.2% | 13.6% | 10.4% | 4.0% | 4.8% | 0.66 | 1.12 | 125 |
| Increased use of alcohol, drugs or medications | 73.0% | 11.1% | 8.7% | 4.8% | 2.4% | 0.52 | 1.00 | 126 |
| Involuntary feelings of desire or arousal | 83.3% | 11.9% | 2.4% | 1.6% | 0.8% | 0.25 | 0.65 | 126 |

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[35] Percentage values were calculated based on the number of responses ("counts") for the scale value divided by the total number of responses submitted for that respective outcome.

Former employees reported that they had suffered from changes in sexual activity to a greater extent in comparison to current employees. Several past studies have reported a similar change in employees working in this area. In Bokelberg (n.d.), approximately 25% of investigators reported that the work had impacted their sexual relationship (for example, a decreased sex drive), while two other studies reported that some employees were having intrusive thoughts and images during intimacy (Whelpton, 2012; Wolak & Mitchell, 2009).

Similar to what was noted in the "Job Demands" section, current and former employees were asked to reflect on different time frames (6-8 weeks versus entire duration within unit, respectively); therefore, the extent to which any similarities and differences can be compared and interpreted is limited. And again, using a retrospective lens to answer a question can be a much different context than to reflect on issues in the present.

### Changes Experienced While at OCSE Unit
Former employees were offered the opportunity to elaborate on other outcomes and conditions that they experienced while at the unit. Survey respondents most commonly reaffirmed their negative world view, overprotectiveness, and how their decisions (involving their children) may have been influenced by their work. For example, one respondent stated,

> I have a difficult time trusting anyone with my child. I believe I am right and just in this thought pattern. It is my job and responsibility to protect my child. Knowing what I know and the

type of evil that is out there to harm and exploit children, I will not have a daycare or babysitter care for my child in my absence.

> "I do view some men (shopping or in the public) as potential threats to children when I see a certain type of man (if he has characteristics of offenders I've seen in abuse material) and especially those types of men who are with children, my thoughts go to what I've seen and wonder if the child is a victim. I would not act on those thoughts but if there was something of concern I would intervene."

Some respondents also acknowledged having flashbacks or associating a child or adult (who they saw out in public) with a victim or offender from previously viewed material. One participant shared that s/he would have *"flashbacks of specific images when not at work, triggered by something visual usually. E.g. seeing a child in a pink dress and relating it to a specific image."*

Former employees were also asked if they had noticed any changes in themselves since leaving the OCSE unit. Of the 102 participants who responded to the question, 34.3% (35/102) indicated that they had not noticed any changes in themselves, while 65.7% (67/102) had noticed change(s) since leaving the unit. Of those who indicated a change, some reported flashbacks and intrusive thoughts, and increased cynicism and paranoia. Contrastingly, some respondents highlighted that they were less cynical and not as overprotective of their children after

they had left the unit. Some reported that they felt a decreased need or desire to socialize, for example one survey respondent indicated, *"don't want to go out. Just work and home. Walk the dog, try to unwind and get sleep. I avoid crowds because I sometimes feel overwhelmed, etc."*.

> *"I find I cannot look at some of the picture of my grandchildren, I question everyone with a child as everyone is an abuser in my eyes. I constantly remind myself this is not the case. I want to talk about cases in the past but no-one wants to hear it. I am reminded daily of certain cases and often wonder how those kids are. I will never forget one particular case and think of almost daily."*

Employees can at times lack the ability to accurately assess how they are doing while in a unit. This lends an interesting concept to discussions regarding limited duration postings and the importance of having employees rotate duties. While beyond the scope of this paper, this should be noted for further research as we try to minimize long term harms.

Some noted that stress levels were reduced, they had more energy, felt happier, and felt more like "themselves" since leaving the unit. Others claimed that they had not realized the extent of the impact of their work until they had left, *"despite that close family or friends had tried to talk to them about it at the time",* as indicated by some respondents. This introduces another critical source of knowledge that would help us to

advance our understanding of the impacts of this work – reaching out to family members for their input. Again, although beyond the scope of the current study, future work could look into this area further.

In retrospect, some respondents expressed the need for maintaining consistent psychological evaluations during employment, maintaining high levels of training and team building in order to mitigate negative mental health effects, having informed support from management, and the importance of continuing with mental health care post-employment (especially services offered within the agency).

> *"I feel like I have returned to my normal self. My husband had said numerous times while I was working in ice [Internet Child Exploitation] that "I had changed" he said that I was angry and suspicious. Although I didn't feel like it at the time because I felt that I was helping kids what he said was true."*

Similar to current employees, employees who are no longer working in OCSE units recognized the significance of their work. This significance made such an impact that some found it challenging to feel fulfilled in their new position/unit. One respondent stated that *"I feel less fulfilled in my new position because the work doesn't seem as important as ICE work. I'm not as motivated every day at work."* Others expressed guilt for leaving the unit, or a *"sense of failure to*

*the children in the images/ videos when I was no longer able to continue the work."*

> *"I actually miss doing work I was passionate about. I feel a little "guilty" that I'm not doing it anymore because I feel like I did a good job at it and made a difference."*

## Health and Wellness Policies

### Current Employees

A total of 511/516 (99.0%) current employees responded to the question on whether or not their OCSE unit had a health and wellness policy in place. Overall, 321/511 (62.8%) did have a policy in place, while 190/511 (37.2%) did not. It is possible that if employees had only recently joined an OCSE unit at the time of the survey, they may not have been aware that a policy existed, or if the unit itself was relatively new, there may not have been an opportunity to implement a policy yet.

#### Beneficial Aspects

For those who responded that they did have a policy, employees were then asked to highlight the components that they found most helpful and beneficial (both formal and/or informal aspects). The component that was most frequently reported as being helpful was having mandatory psychological assessments; where they were in place, the frequency of the mandatory assessments varied from every 3 months, 6 months and 12 months (depending on the agency/unit, as noted within the survey responses). Some

respondents recognized that by making the assessments mandatory, everyone was subject to the same process. As reported in Sinclair, Duval and Quayle (2015), the stigma is minimized when all employees are required to undergo a mandatory assessment. One respondent noted "*I don't stand out as having to go to see the doc. It also makes me go when I might not feel like going."* This is important to highlight, as some individuals may not be aware of changes in themselves. They may not immediately recognize the potential impact that their work (or other life events and factors) is having on them, and would not have otherwise sought help or counselling (Sinclair, Duval & Quayle, 2015). By implementing a mandatory assessment, any changes or impacts will be more likely to be addressed sooner which is critical as we know the sooner potential mental health issues and challenges are addressed, the more positive the outcome. In line with this understanding, some research (for example Price & Kearns, 2014 and Rothbaum et al., 2012) has indicated that early intervention can prevent PTSD and other mental health related issues.

> *"We have mandatory psychological assessments every quarter. I find these very beneficial as it's a chance to talk about the material, how it's/isn't affecting my work/home life. Some of these issues you may not feel comfortable discussing with colleagues."*

Several employees also reported that they found it helpful to have regular access to a health practitioner and that they could seek counselling at any time (depending on the policy, this may or may not be in addition to mandatory psychological assessments).

Team debriefs were highlighted by many employees as being a helpful health and wellness practice within their unit. One current employee reported, *"most helpful are the team debriefs without question - whether these are formal sit down meetings or casual."* A few different formats and frequencies were shared, which included regularly scheduled debriefs, debriefs following a major case or operation, debriefs following a stressful incident, informal, formal, or as required.

A number of employees noted the availability of an Employee Assistance Program within their agency as being helpful. Peer support programs, as well as support from colleagues in general, were also recognized by many respondents as beneficial health and wellness resources (which again, may or may not be part of a formal policy).

> *"Our program is a peer support wellness program with trained peer support coordinators. The program includes child exploitation investigators that other investigators can relate to. They have experience and have seen what we have seen and heard what we have heard etc."*

This finding is consistent with the above results, where it was found that support from colleagues is one of the most important job resources (from which employees get positive energy). Some participants reported on having specific peer support programs in place (which included trained OCSE employees), however it was not specified whether it was a program within the unit or a program at the agency/department level. Additionally, informal social events and team building activities were highlighted by some employees, indicating that these events had a positive impact on them, allowing them to step away from their work environment and decompress. This once again demonstrates the perceived importance of team cohesion and support from colleagues on employee wellbeing.

> *"At work, there are several social activities organized which are, in my opinion, most helpful and beneficial. Birthday lunch, dart league, pot-lucks, bake sales, etc., they help me decompress and associate my work area with a positive energy."*

Pre-employment screening was also identified by a number of participants as a beneficial component of the health and wellness policy. This presented the opportunity for complete transparency, and informed the candidates on exactly what to expect if they were to join an OCSE unit.

Prior to making a commitment, "*pre employment screening gives officers the chance to decide first hand whether or not they are right for the job,*" as noted by one employee. The importance of this practice has also been highlighted within the literature (for example, in Powell et al., 2014a and Sinclair, Duval & Quayle, 2015). Only a few respondents elaborated to note that the screening included the exposure to CSEM, while most did not specify what the pre-employment screening entailed. It would be of interest to gain more insight on the components involved in the pre-employment screening offered by OCSE units of various agencies and the effectiveness of such programs.

Some research has explored primary prevention efforts, particularly within the military setting (for example, Hourani, Council, Hubal & Strange, 2011; Hourani, Tueller, Kizakevich, Lewis, Strange, Weimer, Bryant, Bishop, Hubal, & Spira, 2016). This involves a pre-exposure to trauma in a controlled setting, coupled with resiliency training prior to deployment with the goal of mitigating the impact of combat-related stressors and the development of PTSD (sometimes referred to as predeployment stress inoculation training; PRESIT). In Hourani et al. (2016), it was demonstrated that the training helped to protect against PTSD among Marines without baseline mental health problems. It would be of interest to explore this further within the context of OCSE units, either as a pre-employment screening measure, or as preventative training once an employee is hired onto the unit.

## Suggested Improvements

Employees who had indicated that their unit/agency had a health and wellness policy were also asked to provide suggestions for improvements. Some employees suggested that mandatory psychological assessments be implemented for their unit (if this was not already in place), while others who already had assessments in place proposed that more frequent assessments would be preferred. A few respondents also noted that the assessments should be made available to all employees working in the unit, not just sworn officers. Others recognized that there was a lack of policy enforcement (or awareness) within their units, for example one respondent indicated that *"there needs to be more emphasis of ongoing mental health/retreat programs. Currently on paper we are required to see a mental health professional yearly and on an ongoing basis however this is not followed."*

While a number of participants had noted the benefits of having a mandatory psychological assessment, some also felt that assessments should be voluntary, or upon request, rather than mandatory. Some reported skepticism of the quality of assessments and the intention behind them, where it was perceived that the assessment held little value, and that it was just an organizational requirement. As one employee noted,

> *mandatory psychological assessment is beneficial, but generally requires a good working relationship and sound rapport between the investigator and the medical professional. In the absence of this, the assessments can become routine and more to 'tick a*

*box' than to actually achieve any positive result.*

The importance of having a good relationship and rapport with one's clinician was noted by several participants, which is consistent with what was reported in Powell et al. (2014a). Participants in the 2014 study expressed reluctance with disclosing their emotional concerns because it was believed that the mental health practitioner did not truly understand the nature of the work. In fact, some expressed that their health care provider appeared uncomfortable. They would have been more willing to engage in the assessment process if they believed that their practitioner was more specialized. This suggests that knowledge and understanding (on the part of the practitioner) of the crime type may play an important role in building rapport between a practitioner and an OCSE employee, and could enhance the effectiveness of the assessment.

> *"Mandatory psychological assessments are only as good as the psychologist. There needs to be some training designed for the psychologist to assist in determining wellbeing from members."*

Team debriefs with (or without) a health practitioner was identified as an opportunity for improvement by a number of employees. Involvement of managers and supervisors within the debriefs would also be beneficial, so that they may see first-hand how their employees are coping. Some expressed that by having a practitioner on-site on a regular basis they would be more inclined to use the services offered, either through drop-in sessions, or by booking an appointment. Direct access to an on-site health practitioner eliminates some of the physical barriers and delays related to seeking services off-site, while providing a more immediate response to employees.

> *"I think we should have the psychologists come to work, once a month (or every two months) to allow the employees to talk, outside of their 6 months evaluation. Sometimes employees do not feel like driving to the psychologists, or making that first phone call. By having them on site, it will break down the barriers of professional/client, and allow for more people to seek help and guidance. Making that first phone call is admitting to yourself that you need some help, and not everyone is ready to do this. We should also be able to contact them via email, similar to a live chat room. For some people, it is extremely hard to talk to someone in person, about their personal issues. If they could have a live chat room, where someone would be available to discuss during work hours, this would be very beneficial to everyone. For example, while you are waiting for some documents for a case, and feel down or depressed, you can chat with someone on your computer, without anyone noticing."*

Furthermore, some employees noted that there was a need to improve response times

for psychological services. Despite having off-site access to a practitioner/being offered the services, there were delays in getting an appointment. It was also suggested that an independent health practitioner be made available for such services, one who is not "hired" by the agency to fulfill the requirements of the mandatory psychological assessment. While psychological assessments are important for many reasons, ensuring that employees are able to seek services in a timely fashion, while also ensuring that they benefit completely from such services through open and honest dialogue without being concerned of how it may impact their job/ability to work, is just as important.

Other suggestions that current employees provided included the implementation of a formal pre-screening process (if one was not already in place), more opportunities for team building and social activities to enhance morale and team cohesion, direct access to a gym facility and increased support for physical activity during one's shift, and having access to a "break" room or area. Some employees noted that more involvement with the employees' family members would be beneficial, including the enhancement of their awareness and understanding of the realities of OCSE work, which in turn could help them to support their loved ones more effectively. It was recognized that family members may be the first ones to notice any changes in their loved one, therefore it would be helpful if there was *"periodic contact with member's significant others to ensure they haven't seen any changes in the member's mental health as well as an avenue for the significant other to immediately contact the member's*

*supervisor or division health services and express their concerns,"* as suggested by one employee. It is however important to note that not all employees share the desire to include family members in the work environment in this way. For some, the line between work and home is strong and should not be crossed. The above is raised as a contextual point wherein each unit would have to assess the interest of the employees and listen to their needs in terms of the involvement of family/significant others.

Additionally, some employees highlighted the importance having an awareness of health and wellness in general, and that enhancing this knowledge and awareness within the unit could be an opportunity for improvement. Being able to recognize the signs and symptoms of stress, and knowing how to cope with stress can build resilience within the team. One employee recognized that

> *being conscious of it helps tremendously - realizing what is happening allows you to counteract it. I used to be stuck in denial, and it made things much worse. Funnily enough, helping others in this field helps you a lot - when you tell them what they are feeling is normal, it really reinforces that thought within yourself.*

A few employees recognized the possible benefits of having a rotation available, allowing employees an opportunity to take a bit of time away from the OCSE duties without permanently leaving the unit. This could include a secondment to another unit/taking a different assignment, or seeking a training opportunity.

> *"Further options for rotation or learning development that allows the investigators a temporary break from the frontline of child exploitation investigations without permanently removing them from the unit would be a beneficial way to balance the argument of rotation versus retention and ultimately lead to staff remaining in these specialized areas for longer."*

Some may find that a "break" will permit them to decompress and recharge, allowing them to return to the unit more energized and therefore contribute to greater staff retention. This is of particular importance within OCSE units, given the investment of time, experience and training that is required to develop a specialization in the area (for example in victim identification, covert operations, technology). It may also offer them the opportunity to reflect and assess their wellbeing. As reported earlier, it is possible that some employees do not recognize the extent of the impact of their work until they step away, and perhaps this will allow them to do some reflection.

One additional suggestion to highlight was to implement and/or enhance education and awareness delivered to judicial partners, as it relates to child sexual exploitation investigations. It is important from a sentencing perspective for judges to be fully aware of what constitutes CSEM and the impacts that the abuse has (and will continue to have) on the victims. By also raising awareness of the stressors related to viewing CSEM and the impacts that the work has on investigators, judges may reflect on these additional aspects in their judgement and sentencing. The impacts of these crimes are far reaching, and need to be better understood on a broader scale.

As mentioned, some employees (37.2%) indicated that at the time of the survey, they did not have a health and wellness policy in place. Of those who did not have a policy in place, some provided suggestions on what components could be helpful to them. Similar to what was discussed above, some employees specified that enhanced screening and assessments would be beneficial at the recruitment phase. Prior to committing to working in the unit, candidates would undergo a pre-employment screening and be exposed to CSEM, along with the ability to meet with a health practitioner. This would allow them to make an informed decision on whether or not the job is a good fit for them. Regular psychological assessments while working in the unit, having access to a health practitioner upon request, having the support and flexibility to take time for physical activity during the day, and having post-employment services offered (including a psychological assessment upon exit) were also suggested.

## Former Employees

All 126 former employees who completed the survey responded to the question on whether or not their OCSE unit had a health and wellness policy (while they worked in the unit). Overall, 79/126 (62.7%) did have a policy in place, while 47/126 (37.3%) did not.

> *"My unit offered pre-employment screening, realistic job preview prior to hiring, mandatory psychological assessments and team debriefs including with a psychologist if required. I found the pre-employment screening job preview beneficial as it helped me to understand what i would be doing and seeing. Our team had team building days every few months. This was helpful to my mental health. I found socializing with my team outside of the context of exploitation helped to build stronger team bonds."*

### Beneficial Aspects

For those who responded that they did have a policy, former employees were then asked to highlight the components, both formal (for example policies) or informal (for example guidelines) aspects that they found most helpful and beneficial. Mandatory psychological assessments (and the emphasis is on *mandatory*) were frequently identified as being helpful by former employees, similar to current employees. Some noted that the fact that the psychological assessments were mandatory ensured that regular "check-ins" were done, and that the stigma was reduced since everyone had to follow the same process. As one former employee noted,

> *I believe that it was important to have mandatory assessments with a psychologist. Police officers are often too proud to ask for help otherwise or there's a stigma associated with seeking assistance. So the mandatory visits addressed this. It would have been nice to have team debriefs but wasn't part of the program at that time.*

A number of former employees also acknowledged the benefits of a pre-employment screening and job preview, which helped to ensure that a potential candidate was a good fit for the job, and that there was full disclosure on what the job would entail. Team debriefings, team building events, social activities and peer support (in general, or through specific peer support programs) were also recognized as important and helpful for wellbeing, similar to current employees.

### Suggested Improvements

Some former employees presented some suggestions for improvement to their health and wellness policies. These were all very similar to those identified by current employees. For example, some noted that better oversight of the mandatory assessment process was needed – some had experienced (or observed) significant delays in getting assessed, while some *"investigators slipped thru the cracks and were not assessed for years while in the unit."* This speaks to the importance of managing the assessments to ensure that the key components in the policy are

implemented and acted upon. In terms of pre-employment screening, a few former employees suggested that a more realistic job preview would have been helpful, and could have included the potential impacts of working within the area of OCSE.

Improvements were also suggested for post-employment, where some noted that an exit interview or screening would have been helpful, with enhanced and continued support for a period of time upon leaving the OCSE unit. Extended support upon leaving would ensure that these employees have resources and safeguards in place during their transition to a new assignment in the event that the impacts of their former work only become apparent later in life.

> *"Upon leaving the unit the same screening should be completed, as well as asking the employee if he desires further health and wellness assistance, and will not be looked down upon by the law enforcement agency or be penalized for this."*

Additionally, it is important to note that upon leaving, the peer support system is no longer available to the same extent. In many cases, they can no longer seek the immediate support from colleagues if they recall something distressing or if they need to vent. They cannot simply turn around or walk down the hall to chat with someone who understands. Given this new physical barrier to accessing support from colleagues, alternative safeguarding measures can become very critical. Lastly, having the option of undertaking an alternative

assignment or secondment during one's time in the OCSE unit was suggested, as some former employees noted the benefits of having a short break from the work, while not having to leave permanently. This would also address the concerns that some employees shared in terms of if they seek even temporary assistance that they might have to leave the unit permanently.

Some former employees (37.3%) indicated that while they worked in the OCSE unit, they did not have a health and wellness policy in place. Of those who did not, suggestions were put forward on what components could have been helpful to them. Similar to current employees, these included: the implementation (or enhanced) screening and assessments at the recruitment phase, regular psychological assessments (mandatory or voluntary) while working in the unit, having access to a health practitioner upon request, and having post-employment services offered (including a psychological assessment upon exit).

## Job Resources (Sources of Positive Energy)

### Current Employees

Employees who were working in OCSE units at the time of the survey were asked to identify the extent to which they got positive energy from various job resources (from a pre-established list) when reflecting on the preceding 6-8 weeks, using a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 4 ("to a very great extent"). Employees could also indicate "not applicable" (for example, if they did not come into contact with victims and offenders as part of their regular duties). Based on the five highest mean values, current employees received the most positive energy from: humour with colleagues, results of work, support of colleagues, team cohesion, and the challenging area of work (being challenged at work). It is important to note that while these resources were the top five responses (in terms of highest mean scores), autonomy also had a comparatively high

mean score. Refer to Table 7 for a breakdown of responses by percentage values, mean scores, standard deviations, and the total number of responses for each job resource category, for current employees.

Survey respondents were also offered the opportunity (through an open ended question) to highlight others ways they received positive energy. Support from family and friends was the most commonly identified (additional) source of positive energy. While personal relationships were noted as particularly important in maintaining a healthy balance between home and work life, some respondents re-affirmed that they especially relied on the support from colleagues; it provided them with opportunities to communicate with others who shared and understood the nature of the work.

**Table 7. Job Resources of Current Employees**

| In the last 6-8 weeks, to what extent did you get positive energy from: | Scale (0 = Not at all; 4 = To a great extent) Percentage of responses (%)[36] | | | | | N/A | MEAN | SD | # responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | | | |
| Humour among colleagues | 1.0% | 3.7% | 15.9% | 46.2% | 33.2% | 0.0% | 3.07 | 0.85 | 515 |
| Results of work | 2.7% | 7.5% | 30.6% | 39.8% | 19.4% | 0.0% | 2.66 | 0.96 | 510 |
| Support of colleagues | 3.7% | 7.8% | 28.2% | 41.3% | 19.0% | 0.0% | 2.64 | 1.00 | 511 |
| Team cohesion | 4.7% | 10.7% | 22.9% | 39.5% | 22.3% | 0.0% | 2.64 | 1.08 | 512 |
| Challenging area of work | 2.5% | 8.8% | 31.6% | 40.8% | 16.3% | 0.0% | 2.59 | 0.95 | 510 |
| Autonomy | 4.7% | 9.6% | 29.5% | 39.5% | 16.7% | 0.0% | 2.54 | 1.03 | 509 |
| Opportunities for personal development | 12.7% | 22.4% | 32.6% | 23.0% | 9.4% | 0.0% | 1.94 | 1.16 | 513 |
| Recognition and appreciation from supervisors/organization | 14.1% | 24.5% | 28.2% | 23.5% | 9.8% | 0.0% | 1.90 | 1.20 | 511 |
| Contact with victims and offenders | 14.6% | 18.7% | 18.7% | 10.5% | 3.3% | 34.1% | 1.53 | 1.15 | 513 |
| Recognition and appreciation from victims | 36.1% | 17.9% | 22.0% | 16.5% | 7.5% | 0.0% | 1.41 | 1.32 | 509 |
| Health and wellness support services | 38.3% | 22.3% | 20.5% | 14.5% | 4.5% | 0.0% | 1.25 | 1.23 | 512 |

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[36] Percentage values were calculated based on the number of responses ("counts") for the scale value divided by the total number of responses submitted for that respective job resource.

One respondent noted "*I believe the people that make up the team are the most important aspect in both achieving outcomes and coping with the content. Without a cohesive and supportive team all of our roles would be made much more difficult.*"

> "*Positive energy from colleagues - great cooperation between us, understanding each one of us and the difficulty of the cases we investigated, very supportive team.*"

A number of respondents also elaborated on the importance of humour as a source of positive energy, as it was something that they could share uniquely between colleagues. This has been identified in the literature as a healthy coping mechanism often used by police officers. It has been suggested that humour helps to increase team cohesion by enhancing social bonding and providing relief (Coughlin, 2002; Juul Gouweloos, personal communication, 2014; Powell et al., 2014a; Te Brake et al., 2014; Tehrani, 2011). It should be noted, however, that the humour shared between colleagues within OCSE units can be very dark at times (i.e. "gallows" humour), and may not be understood by others or be seen as inappropriate. Therefore, this type of humour is something that is typically exclusively shared within the confines of the unit (Brokelberg, n.d.; Burns et al., 2008; Dr. Kenneth Middleton, personal communication, 2014; Powell et al., 2014a).

> "*…Making light of, or finding humour in, some of my work and being able to find something funny in any situation with my colleagues helps to lighten the burden of some work.*"

These findings suggest that employees benefit from having the ability to discuss work-related issues and topics with each other, further indicating the importance of team morale and cohesion in reducing stress levels in the workplace (Powell et al., 2014b; Tomyn et al., 2015). It also substantiates the importance of working in a team-oriented environment to protect against emotional overflow (Dr. Patrizia Torretta, personal communication, 2014).

While relationships with colleagues and family were noted as key factors in maintaining a positive mindset, many respondents also stressed the benefits of more independent resources or activities, such as hobbies, exercise and other health-related practices outside of work. This included the importance of taking breaks and seeking opportunities to disengage from work. These coping mechanisms will be expanded in greater detail in the next section.

> "*Many times a week I partake in activities that demand focus - so that I am not thinking about work stuff in the background. Many sports or similar activities do this.*"

Another important theme that was identified as a source of positive energy was positive investigative outcomes (consistent with the finding above, where "results of work" was recognized as one of the top five job resources). More specifically, outcomes that were noted to give employees the most satisfaction included: when an offender was convicted and the employee had been involved in the process, and when a victim received a positive outcome (for example, a victim received the outcome they desired). From the perspective of one respondent, positive energy was received from the *"participation in the arrest of offenders, either as the officer in charge or supportive role. The arrest of offenders brings me the greatest enjoyment in my current role…"*

> *"Positive energy from victims – we are in contact with them couple of times during the investigation of the case and you feel the positive energy from them. They usually call us expressing their satisfactions. They count on you and you feel responsible for them in a good way. This is a challenge for us to do our job in a good way."*

An Australian study by Wortley, Smallbone, Powell, & Cassematis (2014, p. 57) reported similar findings, in that "*focusing on the inherent societal value of the work achieved through successful prosecution*" was an effective distraction technique and coping strategy, as noted by participants who worked in OCSE units. Other researchers have also recognized that case-related feedback was *"a job resource that can meet a*

*basic human need for competence and be useful for meeting needs for learning and development"* (Wortley et al., 2014, p. 68). The impacts (both positive and negative) and the importance of investigative outcomes/the results of work have not been widely researched. Very few studies have recognized investigative outcomes as a source of positive energy, therefore in light of the findings in this current study, it would be of interest to explore this further. Such research would be of interest to law enforcement, but also to partners (for example, industry, non-government agencies) who deal with triaging reports of OCSE but often do not know the outcomes of the reports they send forward. This would also apply to law enforcement units or agencies who play the role of a coordination centre, where they intake high volumes of reports, triage the reports and disseminate them to the police of jurisdiction. In many cases, the file outcomes are not known/shared with them. As with any other unit, employees are invested in their work and in these files, and the lack of closure from being informed of the investigative outcomes may contribute to work-related stress.

### Former Employees

Employees who had previously worked in OCSE units were asked to identify the extent to which they got positive energy from various job resources (from a pre-established list) while at the unit, using a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 4 ("to a very great extent"). Based on the five highest mean values, former employees received the most positive energy from: humour with colleagues, results

of work, support of colleagues, team cohesion, and the challenging area of work. These were the same top five responses provided by current employees and in the same order. Refer to Table 8 for a breakdown of responses by percentage values, mean scores, standard deviations, and the total number of responses for each job resource category for former employees.

Former employees also had the opportunity to elaborate on additional ways in which they received positive energy. Similar to current employees, support from family and friends, support from colleagues (including teamwork and cohesion), positive outcomes of their work, and engaging in hobbies, activities, exercise or other health/fitness-related practices were most frequently identified as resources that provided positive energy.

A number of survey respondents spoke about the supportive environment in which they worked, for example one participant noted that it was "a *fantastic team dynamic that was a supportive culture. There was never any pressure to view on days that you were finding it tough. It was a culture of 'being in this together' that I found positive and supportive*".

The consistent results between former and current employees demonstrates that regardless of whether or not an employee still worked within the unit, his/her perception or view on job resources remained largely unchanged.

**Table 8. Job Resources of former Employees**

| While you were at the unit, to what extent did you get positive energy from: | Scale (0 = Not at all; 4 = To a great extent) Percentage of responses (%)[37] | | | | | N/A | MEAN | SD | # responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | | | |
| Humour among colleagues | 2.4% | 3.2% | 8.7% | 37.3% | 48.4% | 0.0% | 3.26 | 0.92 | 126 |
| Results of work | 1.6% | 6.3% | 19.0% | 32.5% | 40.5% | 0.0% | 3.04 | 1.00 | 126 |
| Support of colleagues | 1.6% | 8.7% | 15.9% | 42.9% | 31.0% | 0.0% | 2.93 | 0.98 | 126 |
| Team cohesion | 4.8% | 6.4% | 14.4% | 47.2% | 27.2% | 0.0% | 2.86 | 1.04 | 125 |
| Challenging area of work | 4.0% | 8.0% | 23.2% | 43.2% | 21.6% | 0.0% | 2.70 | 1.02 | 125 |
| Autonomy | 7.3% | 15.3% | 29.0% | 37.1% | 11.3% | 0.0% | 2.30 | 1.09 | 124 |
| Opportunities for personal development | 10.4% | 20.8% | 32.8% | 24.0% | 12.0% | 0.0% | 2.06 | 1.16 | 125 |
| Recognition and appreciation from victims | 21.0% | 12.9% | 31.5% | 22.6% | 12.1% | 0.0% | 1.92 | 1.30 | 124 |
| Recognition and appreciation from supervisors/organization | 15.2% | 24.0% | 28.0% | 24.0% | 8.8% | 0.0% | 1.87 | 1.20 | 125 |
| Contact with victims and offenders | 10.4% | 22.4% | 24.8% | 11.2% | 2.4% | 28.8% | 1.62 | 1.03 | 125 |
| Health and wellness support services | 27.8% | 25.4% | 27.0% | 11.9% | 7.9% | 0.0% | 1.47 | 1.24 | 126 |

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[37] Percentage values were calculated based on the number of responses ("counts") for the scale value divided by the total number of responses submitted for that respective job resource.

## Personal Resources & Coping Strategies

### Current Employees

Employees who were working in OCSE units at the time of the study were asked to identify the extent to which they agreed with statements relating to the importance of various personal resources (from a pre-established list). Using a scale from 0 ("strongly disagree") to 4 ("strongly agree"), participants reported the following five highest ranked/most important personal resources and coping strategies (based on the highest mean values): good sense of humour, appropriate workspace set-up and equipment, stable home environment, focusing on positive results of work/meaningfulness of work, and engaging in hobbies and leisure activities. Refer to Table 9 for a summary of responses for current employees sorted by descending mean scores.

Some of the top responses provided here are consistent with the top job resources presented above. For example, humour was identified as the top job resource (i.e. based on the mean value, a great extent of positive energy was received from humour) and the top personal resource.

**Table 9. Personal Resources and Coping Strategies of Current Employees.**

| To what extent do you agree with the following statements: to perform well at work, it is important for me to: | Scale (0 = Strongly disagree; 4 = Strongly agree) Percentage of responses (%)[38] | | | | | MEAN | SD | # responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | | |
| Have a good sense of humour | 0.4% | 0.2% | 2.5% | 33.9% | 62.9% | 3.59 | 0.59 | 510 |
| Have the appropriate workspace set-up, equipment and technology | 1.0% | 1.2% | 4.7% | 39.6% | 53.5% | 3.44 | 0.73 | 508 |
| Have a stable home environment | 0.2% | 0.8% | 5.1% | 43.7% | 50.3% | 3.43 | 0.65 | 513 |
| Focus on positive results of work/meaningfulness of work | 0.8% | 1.4% | 6.1% | 47.3% | 44.5% | 3.33 | 0.72 | 512 |
| Engage in hobbies/leisure activities | 0.8% | 2.3% | 7.6% | 43.2% | 46.1% | 3.32 | 0.78 | 514 |
| Be flexible at work | 0.4% | 1.8% | 6.8% | 49.7% | 41.3% | 3.30 | 0.71 | 511 |
| Get support from partner, family or friends | 1.4% | 1.8% | 9.4% | 48.1% | 39.4% | 3.22 | 0.79 | 513 |
| Be committed to my work | 0.6% | 1.8% | 8.9% | 53.3% | 35.4% | 3.21 | 0.72 | 514 |
| Set boundaries and know personal limitations | 0.6% | 0.8% | 11.3% | 54.6% | 32.7% | 3.18 | 0.70 | 513 |
| Be empathetic towards colleagues | 0.8% | 3.1% | 11.9% | 57.5% | 26.7% | 3.06 | 0.76 | 513 |
| Have a healthy and balanced diet | 0.8% | 4.9% | 18.8% | 46.3% | 29.2% | 2.98 | 0.86 | 510 |
| Keep an emotional distance from work | 0.6% | 7.6% | 13.5% | 50.8% | 27.5% | 2.97 | 0.88 | 512 |
| Have control over the way images are viewed | 1.2% | 4.1% | 26.2% | 45.2% | 23.3% | 2.85 | 0.86 | 511 |
| Be empathetic towards victims and offenders | 2.7% | 5.1% | 27.8% | 47.3% | 17.1% | 2.71 | 0.90 | 510 |
| Be spiritual/turn to spirituality | 19.2% | 17.8% | 31.4% | 18.0% | 13.5% | 1.89 | 1.29 | 510 |

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[38] Percentage values were calculated based on the number of responses ("counts") for the scale value divided by the total number of responses submitted for that respective personal resource.

Investigative outcomes and meaningfulness of work was also identified within the top five resources of each category, as was noted by one employee,

> I feel like I have been let into a very important club....one where only a select few worldwide actually KNOW what is happening to children. People have ideas but until you see images and video, you can't imagine. I use that knowledge to teach others about safety and the realities of what is happening to our children. I will always be an advocate for children. That is the positive spin I have put on my work in child exploitation and what keeps me from having a negative outlook on life. I'm honoured to work in this field.

Some participants elaborated on the above-noted personal resources, or offered additional coping mechanisms that help them perform better at work. Generally, current employees recognized the importance of taking breaks from their work and having the ability to step away from their computers with the support from their supervisors, without feeling guilty. A break in the day to have a coffee, go for a walk or engage in other forms of exercise, socialize with colleagues, and use the "break room/area" were all ways in which participants coped with their work. Some employees underlined the importance of team building/social events within the office, or simply having the ability of taking breaks and socializing with colleagues. Having supportive colleagues, an understanding supervisor, and being recognized for good

work were also identified as being helpful for performing better at work.

Exercise (in various forms, such as going to the gym, walking, running, yoga, hiking, biking, playing sports, etc.) was one of the more commonly reported coping mechanism used either during work hours, or outside of work. When exercise or other health practices (meditation, for example) were incorporated during the day, some employees reported that it provided them with an opportunity to decompress, take a break from their work and then return re-focussed.

> "I take time for myself during the work day. Instead of taking a lunch break I use that time to go to the gym. I feel that health and wellness starts with yourself, so I make a conscious effort to step away from the images, videos, files, and go to the gym. It makes me feel really good, in a job/building that can be so difficult to work in."

Health and fitness are especially important in maintaining a positive mindset and coping with daily work-related challenges that arise. Research has demonstrated the positive impact of physical activity on an individual's health-related quality of life which pertains to their mental, emotional and physical health (Bize, Johnson & Plotnikoff, 2007). Specifically, exercise can reduce anxiety, depression, stress and negative mood symptoms (Hamer, Endrighi & Poole, 2012; Mikkelsen et al., 2017).

This link is important when thinking about where a unit is housed; if there is access to fitness equipment, as well, if there are policies in place to allow for breaks during the workday to accommodate for fitness needs. In some cases, it might be feasible to provide funding for those working in OCSE units to practice various physical forms of exercise – similar to providing a budget for other job related training, this type of training could be explored for employees.

Other ways in which current employees cope with their work included listening to music, using a playlist that has been created specifically for work (avoid pairing work/viewing CSEM with music that is typically listened to outside of work) and grounding/leisure activities and hobbies. These included spending time with children/family and pets, church/religious/spiritual practices, travelling/taking holidays, watching movies and playing video games. Studies have demonstrated that relaxing leisure was found to be a positive predictor of coping with stress while social and cultural leisure predicted better mental and physical health (Chun, Lee, Kim, & Heo, 2012; Iwasaki, Mannell, Smale, & Butcher, 2005). This speaks to the positive impact that these coping mechanisms can have on one's wellbeing, which are benefits that employees working in OCSE units have recognized.

While "being flexible at work" was ranked as the sixth highest mean score in terms of importance (refer to Table 9), some employees highlighted this as an important resource within the open-ended question. Having a flexible work schedule/being able to work flexible hours, as supported by their

managers was said to be helpful in reducing stress.

> "Our supervisors are very flexible and allows us to come in early, work late, and/or adjust shifts or days off if we need to while investigating cases. Having that flexibility and autonomy, supported and not micro-managed, makes the job much easier and reduces stress."

*Workspace/Environment Factors that Alleviate Stress*

Having the appropriate workspace set-up, equipment and technology was identified as the second most important personal resource (based on the mean scores) by current employees, indicating that this was one of the most important conditions that current employees felt was needed to be able to perform well at work. Participants were also asked to identify specific aspects of a workspace that could help alleviate potential stress through an open-ended question. Many preferences and recommendations regarding the office layout were provided. For example, a number of participants expressed the importance of having a balance between an open space that promotes proximity and interaction with colleagues (which is particularly useful for discussing cases and offering support), yet also maintains a certain level of privacy to minimize distractions and unintentional exposure to CSEM. It was recommended that monitors should be set up so that they are facing inwards rather than facing outwards

toward hallways/aisles, where a passerby could easily see.

> *"We need to get out of the "cubicle environment". Interaction among colleagues is imperative in this area of work and the office arrangements are not conducive to that. Having said that it is also important that others are not exposed to the images/videos, so a certain level of privacy must be maintained."*

A number of current employees indicated that it would minimize stress if they did not have to be concerned with inadvertently exposing someone, or having to be constantly "on the lookout." Some participants had also recommended having a separate viewing area/controlled area, which would be helpful in terms of minimizing unnecessary exposure. OCSE units should have their own office area, as recommended by some respondents, which should not be shared with other units.

> *"Quiet environment where I can focus on work but it allows me to get up and leave the office and take a break from viewing/working on the case load. Also, make it a restricted area so people in the office can't just walk over and have a conversation and inadvertently view objectionable material you are working on."*

Other workspace related factors that were identified as reducing (or could potentially reduce) stress included: proximity to

windows/having natural light in the office, a comfortable and ergonomic workspace (for example, a standing desk), access to a breakout space or room which could be used for informal discussions or decompressing after viewing, the ability to listen to music (which was identified above as a coping mechanism), access to a gym (also noted as a coping mechanism), and better/more modern technology (for example, computers and monitors). It is important to note that a number of respondents also mentioned that they were satisfied with their current layout (no changes were suggested).

While the above section focussed on personal resources, it was apparent that many of them could be supported and encouraged within the work environment. For example, a wellness library can offer books and other resources on hobbies, self-care, and other topics of interest that promote resiliency. Subject matter experts can be invited to speak with employees about relevant topics such as how to create a good work/home balance, how to manage stress in your personal life, how to make time for and prioritize self-care, and the positive impacts of leisure activities and how to incorporate them into your day. Given the importance of support from colleagues and team morale, regular team building opportunities could be scheduled. A team coffee break, activity, lunch or short outing can offer employees an "excuse" to take a break while surrounded by the support of their colleagues. This could be beneficial as many have reported not taking adequate breaks during the day.

It is important to recognize that there are many opportunities to promote general health and wellness that will not only benefit employees in their work, but at home as well. This combination will serve to enhance overall resiliency in employees. A simple evaluation of the implemented practices, for example, an anonymous survey, could serve to demonstrate the success (or limited applicability) within a unit.

## Former Employees

Employees who had previously worked in OCSE units were asked to identify the extent to which they agreed with various statements relating to personal resources and coping strategies (from a pre-established list), using a scale from 0 ("strongly disagree") to 4 ("strongly agree"). Based on the five highest mean values, former

employees indicated that in order to have performed well at work, it was most important for them to: have a good sense of humour, focus on the positive results of work/meaningfulness of work, have a stable home environment, have the appropriate workspace set-up/equipment, and engage in hobbies and leisure activities. Refer to Table 10 for a summary of responses, sorted by mean scores.

> *"A break out area where people can go and relax away from the workspace, particularly after long periods classifying material."*

The top five personal resources reported for former employees were the same as current

**Table 10. Personal Resources and Coping Strategies of Former Employees**

| To what extent do you agree with the following statements: to have performed well at work, it was important for me to: | Scale (0 = Strongly disagree; 4 = Strongly agree) Percentage of responses (%)[39] | | | | | MEAN | SD | # responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | | |
| Have a good sense of humour | 0.8% | 0.0% | 2.4% | 27.4% | 69.4% | 3.65 | 0.61 | 124 |
| Focus on positive results of work/meaningfulness of work | 0.8% | 0.0% | 4.8% | 42.7% | 51.6% | 3.44 | 0.67 | 124 |
| Have a stable home environment | 0.8% | 0.0% | 7.2% | 45.6% | 46.4% | 3.37 | 0.69 | 125 |
| Have the appropriate workspace set-up, equipment and technology | 0.8% | 1.6% | 5.6% | 50.0% | 41.9% | 3.31 | 0.72 | 124 |
| Engage in hobbies/leisure activities | 1.6% | 0.8% | 11.2% | 44.0% | 42.4% | 3.25 | 0.81 | 125 |
| Set boundaries and know personal limitations | 0.8% | 1.6% | 9.8% | 48.0% | 39.8% | 3.24 | 0.76 | 123 |
| Be flexible at work | 0.8% | 1.6% | 9.6% | 54.4% | 33.6% | 3.18 | 0.73 | 125 |
| Be committed to my work | 0.8% | 0.8% | 12.9% | 50.8% | 34.7% | 3.18 | 0.74 | 124 |
| Be empathetic towards colleagues | 0.8% | 2.5% | 8.2% | 60.7% | 27.9% | 3.12 | 0.72 | 122 |
| Keep an emotional distance from work | 0.8% | 4.8% | 9.6% | 52.0% | 32.8% | 3.11 | 0.83 | 125 |
| Get support from partner, family or friends | 2.4% | 7.3% | 12.1% | 39.5% | 38.7% | 3.05 | 1.01 | 124 |
| Have control over the way images are viewed | 1.6% | 3.2% | 21.0% | 42.7% | 31.5% | 2.99 | 0.90 | 124 |
| Have a healthy and balanced diet | 1.6% | 4.9% | 20.3% | 42.3% | 30.9% | 2.96 | 0.93 | 123 |
| Be empathetic towards victims and offenders | 2.4% | 9.6% | 23.2% | 48.8% | 16.0% | 2.66 | 0.94 | 125 |
| Be spiritual/turn to spirituality | 18.5% | 25.0% | 31.5% | 14.5% | 10.5% | 1.73 | 1.22 | 124 |

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[39] Percentage values were calculated based on the number of responses ("counts") for the scale value divided by the total number of responses submitted for that respective personal resource.

employees. Despite similar mean scores, a slightly different order of resources was identified. Former employees also recognized additional resources that helped with work performance, which were also consistent with those identified by current employees. Some former employees noted the importance of taking breaks and having access to a break area, which would take them away from their desks.

Team building and social activities were highlighted as factors that help with work performance, for example, one respondent noted, *"social activities during work hours, to bring employees together (e.g. BBQs, potlucks). It helps to improve morale".* Additionally, support from colleagues and supervisors were deemed to be helpful, as were various forms of physical activity (related to leisure and hobbies, above) and access to a gym.

> *"Being within close proximity of a gym, a supervisor who understood the need to take time to get the blood pumping and work out."*

### *Workspace/Environment Factors that Alleviated Stress*

Having the appropriate workspace set-up, equipment and technology was identified as the fourth most important personal resource for former employees (based on the mean scores). Participants were also asked to provide specific workspace conditions that could help alleviate potential stress. Working in proximity to others, while incorporating some privacy was frequently noted by

participants (similar to current employees). In the words of one respondent:

> *viewing of material should be undertaken in areas with others present - found the best way to deal with potentially confronting imagery to be able to turn to co-worker and say "look at this". In short the immediate venting was useful.*

Several also highlighted the importance of having an office space uniquely for the OCSE unit – having other units working in the same space may cause additional stress, with a perceived lack of understanding. In taking this even one step further, some former employees recommended that viewing take place in a closed off area, which *"would reduce having to 'walk on eggshells' so as not to offend their delicate sensibilities. A closed off, swipe entry only workspace, so it is 'safe'."* This introduces an interesting relationship between employees within a unit – those employees who view/review CSEM and those who do not. At times this can lead to an "us versus them" perception which can contribute to a negative or competitive work environment. While it may be important to have some separated workspaces, no one should feel disconnected or that their work is something to be ashamed of (for example, having to keep everything hidden). Feeling that they have to keep things away from other employees can lead to an unhealthy work environment. A good balance of privacy and openness will help to keep work places comfortable for all.

Similar to current employees, former employees expressed that windows and natural light were important, as was having a comfortable and adequate workspace (i.e. large enough desk area). In general, employees (both current and former) felt that it was most important to work in proximity with their colleagues, but also to have a workspace set up in such a way that would prevent any unintentional exposure to CSEM to anyone walking by.

*"Workspace needs to be set up so others don't accidentally walk in while you're viewing illegal images/videos. At the same time the workspace should not be isolated from other investigators. Having the cubicle in the back with the monitors facing the wall behind the investigator so you can see who's approaching works well and keeps the investigator included in the daily interactions with his/her co-workers vs putting them in a closet in the basement."*

# Section 4. Recommendations

*Recognition that psychological stress from dealing with child exploitation images is no different than a physical injury on duty. The officer may not be able to fulfill their role for a short period of healing. Just because an officer twists an ankle in a foot chase doesn't mean they aren't suited to be a patrol officer. The same logic should apply to psychological stress.*

-Anonymous participant

Literature findings and the evidence presented in this study demonstrate that a number of different variables can contribute to a positive work environment and can help increase employee health and wellbeing. Based on these key findings, recommendations for promising practices have been developed, and separated into three realms of responsibility: Individual-based Initiatives, Management Initiatives, and Organizational Initiatives. These three realms of responsibility demonstrate the importance of a holistic approach to health and wellbeing. There are distinct responsibilities on each realm that work together to create a coordinated response strategy to increasing and maintaining employee, and hence organizational, wellbeing.

It is recognized that the adoption of these recommendations may vary as each work environment is unique. Since these recommendations may be subjective, they are not to be understood as a one-size-fits-all approach but rather, guidelines for units, managers and agencies to consider. Each unit, agency and country have different

requirements and regulatory bodies, as such, recommendations may need to be tailored to meet specific needs. They can be implemented on a trial basis or permanently within existing and/or new health and wellness policies and practices, as the units or agencies sees fit.

It is also important to re-emphasize that these recommendations should be viewed as "promising practices" rather than "best practices." Further research and follow-up is required (and is forthcoming in phase three of the project) in order to determine the impact of the recommendations and ensure their applicability.

The recommended promising practices presented below have been separated into recommendations for current employees (those who currently work in OCSE units) and recommendations for former employees (those who have previously worked in OCSE units). Please refer to Appendix D for a summary of the recommendations.

## Recommendations for Current OCSE Employees

### I) Individual-based Initiatives and Strategies to Minimize and Mitigate Stress for OCSE Employees

While the roles and responsibilities of employees working in OCSE may vary, it is important to acknowledge that aside from organizational or management-based initiatives, there are many individual strategies and techniques that can be adopted in order to minimize and mitigate some of the potential impacts of their work.

### i. Viewing Strategies

Employees required to view CSEM as part of their jobs should consider the adoption of preventative and proactive approaches to address the potential stress and trauma that may occur as a result of repeated exposure to CSEM. Some suggested strategies are included below.

#### Adopt a 'Gradual Exposure to CSEM' Technique

Some agencies have implemented gradual exposure practices for potential employees joining an OCSE unit. Typically, these practices are offered as a measure of pre-employment awareness or as part of a screening and orientation session to further verify suitability of potential candidates. For example, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Scotland Yard, National Crime Agency - Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, among others, have policies in place that not only engage in the gradual exposure of CSEM for potential OCSE employees but also have mandatory pre-screening psychological assessments in place (Sinclair, Duval & Letellier, 2015). This allows the candidates to be phased-in and experience a "preview" of the job. The pre-employment screening is discussed in greater detail in a later section.

Once an employee begins the transition into the unit, gradual exposure to CSEM should also continue throughout the training period, by limiting the amount and type of exposure. As suggested by employees, this may help the new employee to adjust without an immediate immersion into the material. Furthermore, as written CSEM[40] was identified as a specific stressor for employees, such material should also be incorporated into these gradual exposure processes, as the mental images individuals produce can be as graphic in nature. It would also be important to have a supervisor check in with employees as the exposure increases to talk about the impacts and to again provide resources and suggestions on how to manage the impacts of increased exposure over time.

#### Viewing CSEM in Alternative Size/Thumbnail Size

It is suggested that individuals who are required to view CSEM on a regular basis engage in viewing strategies which minimize the size in which the image is viewed (for example, keeping the images in thumbnail sizes and viewing in black and white/grey scale). Based on findings from this study, it was indicated that once the legal definition of CSEM is met (as defined within the country's criminal code), there may no longer be a need to view the image (or other images) in greater/larger detail. It is recognized that this strategy may not always be possible, for example when an offence needs to be described in detail for the purposes of writing a warrant/court order, or for victim identification efforts. Viewing as a thumbnail or only a portion of

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[40] In some countries (e.g., Canada) any written material that advocates or counsels sexual activity with a person under the age of eighteen years as well as any written material whose dominant characteristic is the description, for a sexual purpose, of sexual activity with a person under the age of eighteen years is also considered a criminal offence (*Criminal Code*, 1985, s 163.1 (1)(b)(c)).

the image as needed will help to limit exposure.

## Viewing CSE Videos without Sound

Similar to how each image may contain unexpected or shocking content, the sounds produced in CSEM videos can be just as, if not more distressing (Mitchell, Kimberly, Jones, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2011; Te Brake et al., 2014). What proves to be most distressing varies individually, however, for those who are more profoundly affected by sound, eliminating this stressor by turning off the sound can potentially be adopted as a useful mitigating technique when viewing CSEM.

## Mental Preparation before a Viewing Session

Using a *Reframing Narrative*[41] may be an effective viewing strategy that serves to mentally prepare oneself prior to viewing CSEM. The narrative should focus on rational and logical statements that limit the potential emotional reaction one may have to a negative stimulus (viewing CSEM in this case) with the goal on focusing on evidentiary details in order to remain analytical and objective. It may also be beneficial for individuals to write their own *Reframing Narrative* as they can ensure that they speak in a language which is meaningful to them while focusing on the aspects of the job that may be more likely

to impact them specifically[42]. Additionally, technology can be an effective way to prepare oneself prior to viewing CSEM, and can prevent unnecessary exposure. For example, some case management systems and investigative tools display warnings before particularly graphic CSEM[43] is displayed. Some tools blur or conceal the images until the user willingly proceeds to view the CSEM by toggling off the feature.

## Taking Breaks

The findings in this study as well as partner agencies (for example, the Online Child Exploitation Across New Zealand [OCEANZ] team) recognize the unintended negative effects to one's health and physical wellbeing from the use of and sitting in front of computers for long periods of time. As such, they encourage regular exercise outside of contractual obligations and encourage regular breaks from the computer with the support of a team leader (Sinclair, Duval & Letellier, 2015). Another example was provided by INHOPE who have introduced Tetris and Wii consoles[44] to their work environment as a means of allowing staff to take short breaks; this has been demonstrated to reduce harm and mental exhaustion (Iwasaki et al., 2005; Sinclair, Duval & Letellier, 2015). Many participants in the current study also

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[41] For an example of a *Reframing Narrative*, please contact the VGT at RCMP.VGT-GIV.GRC@rcmp-grc.gc.ca.

[42] It is important to note that there is a possibility that employees may be negatively impacted by reading or implementing a *Reframing Narrative* that was not written by them as they may be prompted to think about/visualize scenarios that they may have otherwise not thought about. Being mindful of this potential impact, it is recommended that employees be encouraged to come up with their own personal *Reframing Narrative*.

[43] It is important to recognize that other forms of CSEM (i.e., written CSEM) may be equally as impactful for those working in OCSE units. As such, it is recommended that a combination of mitigation strategies and tools are implemented, as applicable. For example, individuals may find it useful to develop a *Reframing Narrative* that specifically addresses the different types of CSEM (visual, auditory, written) in order to best safeguard themselves from potential negative implications and stressors that may arise during a viewing session.

[44] See Section 4.II.i. for more on mitigation tools.

highlighted the importance of taking breaks, whether for physical exercise, a coffee, socialization/debriefing with colleagues, or simply a walk. To ensure that regular breaks are maintained, employees may consider scheduling them into their day, for example setting a timer for one hour after viewing CSEM. Having a reminder to step away from their desks for five or 10 minutes, to stretch, grab a coffee, or practice breathing/self-regulation techniques may encourage employees to take more opportunities for themselves throughout the day to clear their minds.

*If Possible, Avoid Working on Cases in Isolation and Avoid Working on Cases that Involve Child Victims of Similar Age or Similar Features to Children Related to the Employee*

Support from colleagues was identified as one of the most important job resources and source of positive energy. Therefore, as it relates to working on CSEM cases in isolation, this source of positive energy may be missing and could have a negative impact on one's wellbeing. It is recommended that a team should consist of a minimum of four or more individuals (Bokelberg, n.d.), to ensure that this important peer support system is available to employees. Additionally, some of the literature[45] warns of the potential emotional triggers and responses that individuals may experience when working on cases that involve children of similar ages and physical features to children they may know/be related to. Some participants in the current study also reported similar

reactions, such as flashbacks, if they saw someone or something that reminded them of a particular case. Powell et al. (2015) reported that the victim's resemblance to a child known to the employee was in fact a factor that increased the risk of aversive reactions to CSEM, therefore, in such instances it is suggested that an operational file be reassigned if at all possible, and that peer and management support channels are well established and available.

*Adopting a Consistent Viewing Time During Shift*

As noted through the results of this study and in some of the available literature, even the most experienced employee can become overwhelmed due to the graphic nature of OCSE work (Sewell, 1993). As such, it may prove to be useful for employees to determine their own consistent schedule to view material each day. Engaging in consistent viewing times can also offer employees the ability to mentally prepare themselves before viewing which can in turn encourage feelings of control and empowerment.

*Not Viewing Near the End of the Day/Ending the Work Day on a Positive Note*

Some employees have found it beneficial to limit the viewing of CSEM to the morning, as it has provided them with time to clear their minds for the remainder of their shift and before going home, while also ensuring that they had an opportunity to talk to coworkers about any potential impact (Burns, 2007). Since ensuring work-life balance is absolutely integral, finding effective strategies to separate the

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[45] See for example Powell et al., 2015.

workplace from one's personal life can have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of employees working in OCSE. To help create a disconnect between work and home, some employees have found ritualistic behaviours beneficial. These can include viewing a positive image before leaving work (for example, of a peaceful scenery or a happy memory), engaging in visualization techniques (for example, imagining that all investigative files and CSEM are placed into a brief case, which is then locked and stored under the desk, and the office door is then closed), engaging in physical activity (for example, working out, doing yoga, etc.) or implementing a self-care practice upon arriving home (for example, taking a shower or changing into fresh clothes). These strategies have been reported as helpful as they assist in shifting one's mind and focus to positive and calming thoughts and/or engaging in activities which stimulate the release of endorphins, triggering positive feelings. Again, these strategies all depend on individual preferences.

## ii. Psychological/Counselling Services

Responses from this study confirmed that psychological assessments/counselling services, teamwork and peer support programs, health and wellness procedures, and pre-employment screenings (in order to ensure best fit of potential candidates) were all types of services that should be made available and integrated within OCSE units. Some specific suggestions are presented in the sections below.

*Mandatory Psychological Assessments*

While the findings of the study revealed mixed results as to whether or not psychological assessments should be mandatory[46], more often than not, the mandatory assessments were reported as being helpful, or were suggested as an opportunity for improvement (if it was not already implemented). Findings also indicated that annual assessments were not sufficient and that they need to be more frequent. While frequency of psychological assessments will vary, it was suggested that bi-annual or quarterly assessments would be most beneficial; however, an annual psychological assessment should be considered as a minimum bench mark. In terms of making the psychological assessments mandatory, many respondents indicated that this process took some of the stigma away from going to see a psychologist and normalized it for many. The findings in the study highlight the benefits and importance of assessments. Employees are encouraged to do their part in ensuring that they undergo regular psychological assessments. Employees may also consider speaking with their practitioner about self-awareness/assessment tools. These are not diagnostic tools, but rather, offer employees an opportunity to be more proactive in evaluating and self-assessing their resiliency over time, thereby helping them to recognize if/when they should seek help.

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[46] While most employees agreed that psychological assessments are both useful and necessary, some explained that the "mandatory" nature may come across as less genuine and thus less effective if agencies are adopting these practices simply as a way to comply with obligatory policies.

### Access to Private/Independent Psychologists

Employees may be hesitant to seek counselling if services are offered directly through the agency and/or associated in any way to their psychological assessment. They may also be hesitant to be completely open and honest due in part to the concern of negative repercussions on their operational career. It is therefore recommended that alternative psychological resources are made available through an independent psychologist. Having a psychologist on-site and available for appointments or drop-ins was found to be helpful and/or suggested as an improvement by some employees. Alternatively, if the availability of on-site visits is limited and/or not feasible, offering the option of an appointment over the phone or via a secure online chat system could also be explored. It is important to note that, in some cases, the viewing of a single image can have severe impacts. As CSEM can trigger anyone at any time, especially in the face of unexpected and shocking material (Mitchell et al., 2011; Te Brake et al., 2014), on-site psychological services and resources should be made available. It is also important that employees feel comfortable with their psychologist and can talk openly and honestly. Having these experts on-site and integrated in the office environment helps to build relationships of trust and support. If the rapport is lacking, or if the employee feels that the psychological support provider is not a good fit, efforts should be made to find an alternative provider, otherwise the service may not be as effective. It is also important that the employees are able to access services in the official language of their choice as supported by their organization.

### Pre-employment Screenings for Potential Candidates

Ensuring that the job requirements and expectations are properly explained and understood was deemed to be very important to those participating in the current study. Employees seeking opportunities in OCSE should be made aware of the unique stressors that they will be exposed to and the potential impacts (both positive and negative) that may emerge as a result of their role through the participation of a pre-employment orientation/screening session[47]. Additionally, it may be favourable that an open discussion around possible triggers be welcomed as part of the pre-employment screening process. Having an open discussion about possible triggers and cautions around job-related stressors may give individuals the opportunity to reflect and discuss important personal concerns prior to engaging in operational duties. The importance of this realistic job preview and awareness of job-related stressors has also been recognized in some literature (for example in Burns et al., 2008; Tomyn et al., 2015).

### iii. Personal Coping Strategies

According to the responses provided by employees working in OCSE units, many take self-initiated action to maintain

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[47] It is encouraged that orientation/screening sessions are implemented within units/agencies. However, if they are not available, managers should at least compile relevant resources that can be relayed to candidates prior to them joining OCSE.

wellbeing and mitigate the negative impacts related to the work they do. Some positive personal coping strategies have been elaborated upon in the sections below.

### Physical Exercise

As a means to break up the day and decompress, physical exercise was identified as being particularly important and beneficial during working hours. Employees have reported that on-site gym facilities are preferable as they can engage in physical exercise either during lunch or at the end of a work day.

### Eating and Sleeping Well

Generally speaking, having a healthy and balanced diet along with adequate sleep have been noted to have positive effects on overall wellbeing. Employees have noted that eating and sleeping well help to ensure that they are feeling optimal and ready to take on what the day brings.

### Humour

Gallows humour among colleagues was noted to be very important for those working in OCSE units, as it is something that can be uniquely shared between those who understand the nature of the work. It should be noted however that employees need to be aware of their use of humour, and ensure that it is appropriate given the context and those present. Employees should be cognizant of inappropriate uses of humour – when someone goes "too far" too often. This may be an indication that a colleague may be experiencing some distress.

### Hobbies and Leisure Activities

As many employees become emotionally invested in their cases they tend to carry these emotions with them, which can negatively impact their psychological wellness (Bulmer, 2010; Burns, 2007). Regularly engaging in hobbies and leisure activities, such as, yoga, knitting, cooking etc., is a healthy practice that allows employees to divert their energy into something non-work related.

### iv. Social Support

Social support was identified as a very important factor in mitigating some of the job related stress that one may experience and achieving a better work-life balance. Based on the responses from this study, some of the most important factors have been elaborated on in sections below.

### Supportive Colleagues

Given the nature of their work, employees working in OCSE units often feel unable to talk to their significant others or friends about their work (Atkinson-Tovar, 2003). As such, findings from this study indicated that many participants relied on their co-workers as their main source of social support given the common experiences that they share. Some participants had also reported that they do not wish to impose any burden on their loved ones by discussing their work. This places even more emphasis and importance on seeking continued support from colleagues and ensuring a safe and supportive work environment where concerns can be shared and discussed.

## Family Support

Despite a hesitation and resistance to discussing work-related matters with family members, the support that they offer was nonetheless identified as an important source of positive energy. Much support can be received without discussing details of work – simply by sharing that *"I've had a hard day"* can result in some much needed compassion and understanding. Family members are also able to recognize changes over time in their loved one, changes that the individual may not immediately (or ever) notice about him/herself. As such, drawing on this important source of support is vital. Of note, to help remove some of the boundaries that may hinder employees from reaching out to their family at a time of need, it is suggested that voluntary sessions in which family members are informed of their loved one's work may be of value. Similarly, information and resources (related to OCSE work and how to support a family member working in OCSE) may be helpful for family members to receive, in addition to contact information for sources of support (for family members themselves to use if needed).

## Team Approach/Positive Working Environment

Supportive colleagues and supervisors in particular were identified as being important in minimizing stress within a work environment. This not only entails having an informal open-door disclosure policy but also includes actions such as giving frequent positive feedback, celebrating employee life-events and accomplishments, and helping employees focus on the positive results of their work (Bourke & Craun, 2013). As recognized by those participating the current study, regularly-scheduled team social events were deemed to be a very important aspect to health and wellbeing, while contributing to a positive work environment and enhancing team morale. Dog therapy within the office setting can be another source of positivity and support, where preliminary research findings[48] suggest that it offers employees something to look forward to and is something enjoyable to speak about with their family and friends, as it relates to their day.

## II) Management Initiatives and Strategies to Help Reduce Stress for OCSE Employees

The literature and the survey findings indicate that while managing stress levels and coping with job demands is often perceived to be a personal undertaking, the role of management is also very important. Given that warning signs can manifest in an individual's thoughts, emotions, behaviour, work relationships, or physical health, it is imperative that management is equipped to detect and appropriately address these symptoms (Edelmann, 2010). Supervisors also play a direct and critical role in prevention – where a number of unit-level initiatives and practices can be

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[48] As part of the SSIS – RCMP's in-house health and wellness initiatives and ongoing research in this area, a therapy dog program (offered through St. John's Ambulance) has been introduced at the office. Preliminary findings and anecdotal evidence suggest that the weekly dog visits enhance positivity within the office and offer something to look forward to in the day. To some, it has also provided a conversation piece at the dinner table, allowing those employees to discuss something positive and fun about their work day. Research efforts are ongoing in order to better understand the short and longer term impacts of the therapy dog program.

implemented and supported in order to reduce the impacts of work-related stressors. Not only is it important for supervisors to support such initiatives, but it is recommended that they actively engage in them as well. It has been shown that leaders who are committed to maintaining their own wellbeing and are able to convey that commitment to their teams, can influence the health of employees, but also the health of the organization as a whole (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2020).

## i. Health and Wellness Policy/Stress Management Programs

The findings from this study confirmed that health and wellness policies as well as stress management programs are crucial for employees working in OCSE. It is important to recognize that the suggestions below have been presented generally rather than as specific examples of types of policies and/or programs. This is simply because these guidelines should be implemented and enforced within the organizational and unit structures, as applicable. For some suggestions, please see the sections below.

### *Establishing a Health and Wellness Policy*

As reported in the current study and literature, it is critical for a unit to have a health and wellness policy. These policies help raise awareness of the challenges and stressors that are associated with working in OCSE units, and communicate the message that an employee's health and wellness are of importance to the organization (Sinclair, Duval & Letellier, 2015). By having a policy in place, the agency/unit ensures that employees have

access to services and resources, while also reducing the stigma of speaking openly about the difficult aspects of OCSE work as well as openly asking for help.

### *Implementation of Health and Wellness Policy*

While the establishment of a health and wellness policy is critical, the implementation of said policy is of utmost importance. In contrast, inconsistent approaches to health and wellness policies or lack of enforcement can lead to employee frustration and a loss of confidence in managers and, in some cases, the organization. Additionally, a lack of enforcement (or delayed enforcement) of these types of policies can lead to greater exposure to risk, as there may be a delay in identifying job-related health implications. Findings from the present study also highlighted that these types of policies should apply to all employees and managers alike. While some managers may not be exposed on a daily basis to CSEM, they share an increased knowledge of these crimes and need help to understand how to better manage their employees. The focus of the policy may differ depending on role of the employee. Furthermore, encouraging team events and peer support programs were noted to be a few of the most (informal) beneficial aspects of health and wellness policies. By incorporating a number of different formal and informal components, employees may recognize that the implementation of health and wellness policies is more than simply satisfying administrative requirements (Powell et al., 2014a). Additionally, ensuring that there are effective means available to evaluate

health and wellness policies could help to monitor consistent enforcement across the unit as well as offer opportunities for employee feedback to maximize their effectiveness. Ensuring consistent enforcement as well as evaluation of these policies underlines the message that these policies are in place to safeguard and meet the employees' needs and that these needs are prioritized by their employer.

## Implementation of Mandatory Assessments (Quarterly, Biannually, and Annually)

Not only is it critical to have a policy in place, but many participants in the current study indicated that making psychological assessments mandatory is beneficial to employees. This includes being assessed prior to, while working in, as well as when leaving an OCSE unit[49]. Implementation and enforcement of mandatory psychological assessments minimizes the stigma of seeking psychological services as all employees are subject to the same process. However, while making these assessments mandatory is an important component, the frequency of enforcement was also noted to be of equal if not greater importance. Ensuring that these "checks in place" occur at regular time intervals would contribute towards identifying any negative changes in an individual sooner rather than later. The

timing of these mandatory assessments is an important area in need of research.

## Seeking Experienced Clinicians

Survey participants expressed the importance of having a good relationship and rapport with their clinician. In order for this to be achieved, it is vital that clinicians have insight and a good understanding of the nature of OCSE work. Preferably, all clinicians who are involved in the psychological assessments of employees should have experience in providing services to OCSE employees. If this is not feasible, they should undertake training or become acquainted with the work in advance of offering services. Management could play a role in ensuring that the clinicians are informed and have the resources they need to learn about OCSE (for example, they could organize an information session/presentation). Without this knowledge, the psychological services offered to employees may not be as effective, and employees may feel a lack of confidence in the services rendered.

## Implementation of Mitigation Techniques, Strategies and Training

There are known mitigation tools that are readily available and are currently being used by some OCSE units and agencies, for example *Tetris, Where's Waldo* and using an eye patch while viewing CSEM[50]. It is

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[49] Assessments/follow-ups were also recommended to be completed at some point after leaving the OCSE unit, and is covered in more detail in the recommendations for former employees.

[50] As part of an in-house health and wellness initiative in 2018 the SSIS – RCMP implemented a number of known mitigation tools and strategies in order to extend support to employees working with sensitive, traumatic and difficult material, including CSEM. Some of the known mitigation tools that were implemented included *Tetris* and *Where's Waldo* Books which are tools recognized for their potential positive impacts as they provide an individual the ability to engage in bilateral stimulation of the brain which assists with the disruption of memory formation from exposure to intrusive images (materials) (Iyadurai, Blackwell, Meiser-Stedman, et al., 2018). These tools are also being used within specialized units of the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA).

recommended that managers make mitigation tools and techniques available to employees, while also offering training and awareness sessions on health and wellness. Managers might consider preparing an "employee care package", which can be provided to new employees when they join the unit. The package could include various mitigation tools and health and wellness resources[51]. Raising awareness on health and wellness on an ongoing basis while demonstrating that it is prioritized by management, will reduce the stigma while taking a preventative and proactive approach to reducing job-induced stress.

Training sessions and/or workshops could:

- cover topics such as enhancing employee capacity to:
  - recognize the psychological and physiological impacts of chronic exposure;
  - understand and identify the signs, symptoms and impacts of vicarious trauma and stress, (including: psychological, physiological, intellectual/cognitive, emotional and/or behavioural); and,
- provide employees with tools and techniques to build resiliency and adopt coping mechanisms (while including the difference between effective and ineffective mechanisms[52]) to help mitigate the impacts.

Additionally, training on topics such as positive thinking, gratitude, anger management, leadership and resolving

conflicts would also serve to build resilience while developing employees and promoting positive morale.

*Understanding and Supporting Employee Needs*

Understanding the needs of employees and the challenges that they face is an important aspect of effective leadership and supervision practices. Many survey respondents highlighted the significance of support and flexibility from management as it helped them to perform better at work and contributed to their overall wellbeing. It is recommended that supervisors invest time into getting to know their employees and to better understand their workplace expectations and needs. Ensuring that they understand the expectations of employees and the ways in which they perceive "flexibility in the workplace" is vital. Having team discussions, brainstorming sessions or seeking feedback during one-on-one meetings could be helpful for managers in order to gain this insight. Relatedly, seeking an understanding of the work that they do and the resources that are needed is equally important (from a health and wellness perspective, but also from the perspective of their work – what tools, training and equipment are required to be most effective at their jobs).

Management can also benefit from seeking anonymous feedback from employees (for example, through an anonymous "feedback box"). By becoming aware of the general trends and key concerns as expressed by

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[51] For example, SSIS – RCMP provides new OCSE employees with an "employee care package". For more information on its contents, please contact the VGT at RCMP.VGT-GIV.GRC@rcmp-grc.gc.ca.
[52] This should include the appropriate use of humour, given the significance of this coping mechanism.

employees, management could play a more active role in providing targeted support services to employees and responding to their needs. For example, if many employees are discussing alcohol issues, units could offer sessions on alcohol use – to build prevention efforts and specific response strategies into the units.

Managers should also take the time to "check in" with their employees at specific points in time, for example, at regular intervals (for example, monthly) and following major events/critical incidents. Extra consideration should be given when a new employee joins the team, if an employee is on extended leave, and if an employee leaves the OCSE unit.

Managers could also offer employees opportunities to reinvigorate their sense of purpose, to remind them of the positive difference that they are making in protecting children, and to promote pride in their organization. For example, managers could support opportunities for employees to speak at meetings, events or conferences to showcase their work and successes. Alternatively, managers could work with the unit to develop a mission statement, to serve as a reminder of the "why" and collective goal of their work.

## ii. Size of Investigation Team
It is of utmost importance that OCSE units are appropriately staffed in order to be able to deal with the ever-increasing number of cases. Some important aspects to consider as they relate to the OCSE investigation teams are presented below.

### Ensuring an Appropriately-sized Team to Handle the Workload
Many employees who participated in the current study expressed concern over inadequate resources within their unit, which contributed to the work pressure and workload. To minimize the stress that results from workload, an adequate number of resources should be in place. While it is recognized that this is not always possible due to organizational/agency-imposed limitations (for example, budgetary constraints), the negative impact that work pressure has on employees must be taken into consideration.

### Ensure Appropriate Employee Workload
It is particularly important to ensure that all members receive a relatively equal workload. Overachievers should undertake more work at their own discretion, but this should be closely monitored by their supervisors in order to prevent burnout.

## iii. Optimization of Work Environment
Participants of this study placed great importance on their working environment – that it is appropriately set up and equipped. Some suggestions for optimizing the working environment of OCSE units are presented below.

### Appropriate Technical Equipment
Having the appropriate technical equipment was identified as an important resource for employees, as it has a direct impact on their ability to do their job. Equipment can include multiple monitors, high quality headphones, software and technology, and access to all necessary platforms and databases.

### Optimal Working Area/Environment

Optimizing the work space with windows and lots of natural light, higher wall partitions, stand-up/counter-height desks, private office spaces while remaining in close proximity with colleagues were all identified as important workplace conditions for OCSE employees. Results from the survey suggest that a cubicle environment is not always ideal for this line of work, and that the work space needs to be designed to prevent accidental exposure of CSEM to those who are walking by. Alternatively, separate viewing rooms/sections could be designed, with appropriate sound proofing to minimize accidental exposure to the material. However, the resulting "isolation" of creating a separate viewing room should also be kept in mind. If space/layout permits, consideration can be given to offer a workspace by a large window and/or a treadmill/bicycle desk to be shared amongst team members.

### Rest Areas

Many employees recognized the need and importance of adequate "rest areas/break rooms". It is recommended that OCSE units are equipped with areas in which employees can step away from their work, clear their minds, engage in mitigation tools or techniques, and/or debrief with colleagues.

### iv. Resources

The lack of financial and human resources was noted to be one of the main factors causing distress among those who participated in the study. Inadequate financing of OCSE units may prove to be detrimental in providing OCSE employees with the appropriate equipment and training opportunities that they need in order to carry out investigations most effectively. Furthermore, inadequately staffed units may negatively impact the capacity of OCSE units and their ability to deal with the ever-increasing volume of investigations. Some considerations as they relate to resources are presented below.

### Financial Resources

Adequate resources for training, traveling, technical equipment, health and wellness initiatives/resources, and other unit-specific needs are necessary, and can play a positive role in employee wellness.

### Human Resources

In tandem with financial resources, the lack of adequately staffed OCSE units and the constant pressure and demand to keep up with the job were noted to cause distress and negatively impact employee wellbeing. As such, it is of utmost importance that OCSE units are adequately staffed to respond to the workload and that there is an equal distribution of work among employees, as highlighted in Section 4.II.ii.

### v. Organizational Support

Organizational support was noted to be especially important for optimal team performance, as reported by many participants of the current study. Employees working in OCSE units reported that support from management and open/flexible supervision strategies were especially favoured. Some of the related recommendations include the following.

## Training

Training opportunities should be made available for all eligible employees in order to promote skill development and to optimize their abilities to complete assigned tasks. It is important that management recognizes the dynamic landscape and scope of online child sexual exploitation, which requires continuous development and a specific skill set to respond effectively to these investigations.

## Support for Employees in Special Circumstances

Extending support to employees in circumstances that are perhaps unrelated to work but are impacting their ability to carry out tasks is recommended. For example, alternative work assignments if an employee is experiencing significant stressors in their personal life (for example, a personal illness or illness in family). Accommodations should also be considered or offered to those who are expecting a child, have recently become parents, or have recently returned to work following parental or other type of extended leave as life events can have a direct impact on one's stress levels. Relatedly, support from human resource departments should be extended in order to assist employees who require a temporary or permanent transition out of OCSE units in a timely manner. Employees should be provided with a meaningful opportunity if transferred out of the unit, regardless of whether it is to take a break from their OCSE work in the hopes of returning, or to pursue a new career path.

It is also recommended that consideration is given to the psychological assessment testing of anyone leaving and/or returning to an OCSE unit for non-work related reasons (for example the birth of a child, taking care of an ill family member). As major life events, both positive and negative, can impact one's emotional health and wellbeing, it would be ideal for employees to be assessed at exit/upon re-entry to OCSE. This will establish an additional safeguarding measure to ensure that these employees are still suitable to carry out all tasks and will allow management to support them in making alternative work/task assignments if necessary.

## Supportive Supervision

The literature highlights that a supervisor's understanding of OCSE-related work, and the potential impacts of working in OCSE is imperative to being able to extend support to his/her employees. As a result, support from supervisors directly contributes to the welfare of the unit (Bourke & Craun, 2013). Sources of tension are created if the unit supervisor misunderstands the nature of the work, as they are unable to grasp the realities that employees face, which includes being exposed to traumatic materials, being under-resourced, and being overworked (Te Brake et al., 2014). It was also noted that supportive supervision removes the fear that employees will be temporarily or permanently removed from a unit if they express any concerns or difficulties (Dr. Kenneth Middleton, personal communication, 2014). Thus, supervisors must not only be supportive but informed as well. Some recommendations to prevent this misunderstanding include hiring managers who have previously

worked in an OCSE unit, exposing them to CSEM (as part of their new employee orientation), and having them take part in team debriefs, mandatory psychological assessments and any other health and wellness practices.

Lastly, it is recommended that managers play an active role in reducing the stigma surrounding mental health and the psychological injuries that may arise through work. Managers can demonstrate their support through modeling self-care, prioritizing health and wellness within the unit, and promoting more positive language and dialogue as it relates to mental health.

### Equal Opportunity
By ensuring equal and fair treatment of all employees, and by making an effort to ensure processes are transparent (for example, employment, promotions, training etc.), team morale may be enhanced.

### Work Schedule Flexibility
Offering flexibility within shift scheduling, such as flexible start times and compressed work week options may promote employee wellness as a result of management being accommodating and understanding to commitments outside of work (for example, family reasons).

### Feedback on Case Files
Employees who participated in the current study recognized the importance of knowing the outcome of their files and receiving closure. Supervisors should seek opportunities to be able to offer this important feedback to employees. Furthermore, appropriate information sharing across OCSE units is encouraged, as a number of different units/countries may

be involved in the investigative processes.

### III) Organizational Initiatives and Strategies for Optimal Performance within OCSE Units
As reported in the literature and through the current study, proactive approaches taken by organizations to improve the emotional, physical and psychological welfare of their employees enhances the workplace environment, which in turn, optimizes work performance. This is especially relevant for employees within OCSE units, who may experience a unique range of stressors. The list below includes initiatives and strategies that organizations can adopt to promote employee wellbeing and productivity.

### i. Mandatory Health and Wellness Policy
As noted throughout the study, health and wellness policies are very important for employees engaged in OCSE-related work. While units may implement policies that are suitable to their workplace conditions and environment, there are several suggestions that should be considered at the organizational level, and are listed in the sections below.

### Orientation Session for New Employees
A number of employees have reported that their agencies have implemented a pre-employment awareness/orientation session and screening, as mentioned in Section 4.I.ii., as they were found to be an especially helpful aspect of their health and wellness policies. These types of orientation sessions ensure that candidates are fully aware of what to expect on the job, and are informed on the potential challenges and stressors related to this line of work. It is

recommended that organizations offer these sessions to perspective employees, and have psychological resources/support made available following the session and exposure to CSEM.

Orientation sessions are not only important for those who will be directly exposed to CSEM through their regular duties, but for all employees who will be working within OCSE units (for example researchers, administrative staff, technical support staff, etc.). While exposure to CSEM during the session may not be necessary for all positions/categories of employees, awareness of the material does need to be communicated, along with the risks of "accidental" exposure, potential impacts, along with how to respond and deal with any resulting feelings. By offering these sessions, candidates are then able to make an informed decision on whether they feel that the job is a good fit for them.

## Mandatory Implementation of Health and Wellness Policy

Since OCSE employees face unique occupational stressors, there is an increased risk of psychological harm in the absence of an adequate policy, procedural safeguards, training, supervision, and prevention (Krause, 2009). As reported in this current study, many employees highlighted a number of benefits to having a health and wellness policy. Therefore, it is recommended that all OCSE units implement a health and wellness policy that is supported at the organizational/agency level.

## Mandatory Enforcement of Health and Wellness Policy

Prolonged exposure can be harmful to one's physical and psychological well-being (Stevenson, 2007). It has been reported that, at times, OCSE employees fail to recognize the warning signs of stress, often due to the high satisfaction associated with this line of work (Burns, 2007). This was consistent with the findings of this current study where some former employees had indicated that the impacts only became apparent after having left the unit. While the existence of a health and wellness policy is essential, it can only be effective if it is enforced. It is critical that the organization takes accountability in enforcing the policy, such that all employees can benefit from this means of support.

## Implementation of Mandatory Psychological Assessments (as Per Policy Standard)

It is recommended that mandatory psychological assessments are supported and implemented at the organizational/agency level in order to provide continual support at regular intervals to all employees throughout their tenure.

## Mandatory Health and Wellness Training for Management

It is important for managers to be able to recognize signs of stress. Given that the risk for compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout among OCSE employees may increase over time, it is important that managers have an understanding and awareness of the impacts of the work and potential signs and symptoms of stress. This can be achieved

through different training opportunities designed for those in supervisory or management positions. This could include leadership training - how to better understand employee needs and how to effectively support them. Many OCSE employees who participated in the current study acknowledged the importance of having a supportive and understanding manager, and thus it is recommended that the organization provides opportunities to managers to meet this need.

## ii. Implementation of Stress Management Programs and Resources

Just as health and wellness policies are of great importance, additional stress management programs further aid employee wellbeing. Some suggestions for stress management programs at the organizational level are presented below.

### On-site Private/Independent Health Practitioner

In light of the findings suggesting that police officers are reluctant to get help due to being perceived as weak and unfit for duty (Saunders, 2003; Henley Woody, 2005), having access to an independent licensed practitioner outside of the agency/organization may help to reduce any perceived stigma of utilizing such services. However, in the event that accommodations to see an independent practitioner outside of the unit are not possible, having a health practitioner on-site who is well versed and familiar with OCSE-related work may also offer the opportunity to seek services as needed, without experiencing delays in obtaining an appointment.

### Implementation of In-unit Wellness Programs and Initiatives

A number of informal health and wellness-related initiatives were identified by OCSE employees as being helpful. These included team building and social events, resiliency training, "break rooms/areas", team debriefs, among others. It is recommended that agencies offer and support a variety of wellness initiatives.

### Development of Peer-to-Peer Support Programs

Some literature (for example Krause, 2009; Murphy, 2016; Perez et al., 2010) has noted that that law enforcement officers feel more comfortable speaking with other law enforcement officers and/or peers over matters related to their job (for example, traumatic events). OCSE employees also highlighted the benefits of having a peer-to-peer program in the current study. Peer Support Officers (PSO's) would therefore be a useful resource to have in the workplace (Murphy, 2016) and agencies should encourage both the formation and maintenance of such programs.

### Mandatory Debriefing Sessions/Open-door Policy

Team debriefs were recognized as a helpful practice within OCSE units. It is thus encouraged to hold these sessions regularly, while using a combination of formal and informal mechanisms for employees to express any concerns that they may be having. It will be important to determine who should be included at these sessions as oftentimes some employees are omitted (for example, intel analysts, triage members).

### Implementation of Mentorship Programs

Given the importance of support from colleagues, and the steep learning curve that is experienced upon joining an OCSE unit, it is recommended that mentors are assigned to new employees. It would not only benefit the new employee by having a trusted source of support, but would also offer leadership opportunities to the mentor. This relationship could focus on the job details, but also could start the development of a support strategy as the new employee shares what they are experiencing and the mentor could share strategies they have implemented. Of course, it will be important to try to recruit mentors who are well-versed in the area of health and wellness.

### Support Program(s) for Family and Friends of OCSE Employees

As this line of work is particularly unique, support to families should also be extended as there is a need to understand the associated challenges that OCSE employees may experience (for example, through education about the unique aspects of the job and awareness sessions or joint social events). Much thought and discussion will be needed around this factor as findings in the current study demonstrated strong variability on the role that family should play in this area.

### On-site Gym Facilities

Many OCSE employees stated that they relied on physical activity as an effective coping mechanism and found that breaking up their day by engaging in exercise was beneficial to their wellbeing. Having access to an on-site gym facility would promote employee health and wellness, and offer the opportunity to alleviate stress during one's shift. It may also make it more feasible and likely for employees to benefit from physical activity during the day (versus having to drive to an off-site fitness center), given their expressed reluctance to take breaks. As such, agencies are encouraged to look into means of securing an exercise room, as per their organizational standards.

### iii. Implementation of Mitigation Tools and Techniques

While many mitigation tools and techniques should be offered and supported at the unit level to address unit needs, it is recommended that some of these resources need to be supported by the organization. If supported at a higher level, other units across the agency may also benefit. Some examples have been offered in the sections below.

### Physical Group Activity Sessions

Positive feedback was received from OCSE employees on group activities and their benefits. Some examples may include group yoga sessions, group hikes/nature walks and/or other forms of stress-relieving practices.

### Meditation and Mindfulness Workshops

Providing opportunities to attend and learn from engaging experts in the field of meditation and mindfulness may offer helpful insight and resiliency tactics to individuals working in OCSE units.

*Wellness Library Program*

Implementation of a wellness library program[53] where employees have anonymous access to topics of interest (for example, addiction, parenting, resilience, grief, emotional awareness, finances, fitness, health, hobbies, inspiration, leadership, nutrition, relationships, sleep, autobiographies of influential individuals, work-life balance etc.) can offer an additional source of support. The inclusion of this resource into the office surroundings also reminds employees on a daily basis that health and wellness is an everyday issue, not just on formally scheduled days when an event is taking place.

## Recommendations for Former OCSE Employees

While the recommendations presented in the previous section were developed based on an overall assessment of all reported findings, some recommendations emerged that were specific to the former employee sample. They are organized by the same three realms of responsibility (Individual-based initiatives, Management Initiatives, and Organizational Initiatives) and are complementary to the recommendations presented in the previous section. These recommendations will be important to take into consideration for employees who are preparing to leave an OCSE unit, or who have previously left an OCSE unit. There is a clear need for further longitudinal research in this area.

### I) Individual-based Initiatives and Strategies to Minimize and Mitigate Stress for Former OCSE Employees

### i. Support Group for Former OCSE Employees

Former OCSE employees reported experiencing job-related difficulties post-employment in conjunction with a lack of support. Therefore, the formation of support groups/ad hoc committees may prove to be beneficial. Former colleagues or other individuals who had been exposed to similar job stressors are encouraged to meet and share their post-OCSE experiences with each other, as it is recognized that former employees have a unique perspective upon leaving the unit.

### II) Management Initiatives and Strategies to Help Reduce Stress for Former OCSE Employees

### i. Mandatory Exit Assessment

Many OCSE units provide mandatory psychological evaluations throughout an employee's term, with some units continuing to provide such services even after employees leave an OCSE unit. However, the frequency of these evaluations vary tremendously between units. The feedback provided by former OCSE employees spoke specifically to the importance of a mandatory exit assessment. At the very least, employees should be assessed upon leaving an OCSE unit, and if possible, a follow-up assessment should be provided some time after, or at least be offered as an option[54]. Since

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[53] For example, the SSIS – RCMP has implemented an extensive resource library. Please contact the VGT at RCMP.VGT-GIV.GRC@rcmp-grc.gc.ca to obtain the book inventory list.

[54] Due to limited research, the ideal time interval/lapse for a follow-up assessment is not yet known.

employees reported additional stress from feeling guilty about transferring out of the OCSE unit – even after having served a significant amount of time – this further raises the importance of offering such services to former employees.

*Phasing-Out Period in OCSE Unit*

Similar to the gradual exposure and phasing-in approach recommended for new employees joining an OCSE unit, if it is known in advance that an employee will be leaving the unit, a "phasing-out" approach should also be applied. Employees working in OCSE units have demonstrated tremendous dedication to and investment in their work, and an abrupt stop to their work may result in additional stress and feelings of guilt from leaving. If employees are offered sufficient time to wrap up investigations while not taking on new ones, then shifting to less operationally-focussed tasks (and a gradual elimination of the viewing of CSEM), potential stress that could result from the transition out of the unit may be mitigated.

In other cases, there may be a more immediate/urgent need to find alternative work arrangements for employees, and in these circumstances, human resource departments should be engaged to facilitate the transition out of the OCSE unit in a timely manner.

*Post-Employment Debriefing Sessions*

In addition to an exit assessment, a debriefing session prior to leaving the OCSE unit would be beneficial. This session could be facilitated by the manager, and could include components such as: an employee "check-in", an overview of what they could expect in the months to come (in terms of potential feelings, stressors and the longer term impacts of their work that may only become apparent after leaving), overview of resources and support systems should they need to access them, and most importantly, reassurance that it is "ok" to pursue this change – they should not feel guilty – some employees shared that they felt like they were giving up child protection when they left. A manager could also seek feedback on what worked and what did not work well within the unit, to seek opportunities for growth and improvement.

*Support for Former Employees*

Support after leaving an OCSE unit was also noted to be important. While individual needs vary, it is of utmost importance that resources are made available to former employees, and that they are aware of how to access them if needed. Forms of support could include: access to psychological services, specific wellness resources, ongoing contact and "check-ins" by the former manager (for example, a check-in once a month for the first 3 months, then at 6 months, then at one-year post departure), and access to support groups.

*Support for Families of Former Employees*

Access to services for families of former employees would also be beneficial, given the longer term impacts of the work that could be experienced. For example, some Employee Assistance Programs provide free services to family members including confidential counselling from a licensed mental health professional (Sinclair, Duval & Letellier, 2015).

## i. Staffing Opportunities in Management Positions within OCSE Units

Some suggestions indicated the benefits of having former OCSE employees staffed in management positions in order to alleviate some of the reported challenges, including a lack of understanding of the area of crime. Having an experienced manager who understands and has experienced first hand the unique challenges and stressors of OCSE work may in turn mitigate some of the stress experienced by employees. However, it is also important to have managers who are strong in the area of interpersonal skills and who are able to be flexible in their management approach. Not all employees need the same things when it comes to health and wellness and managers need to fully comprehend this concept to be most effective.

# Section 5. Future Research Directions

The intent of this study was to gain a more fulsome understanding of the stressors, impacts (both positive and negative) and mitigation strategies related to working within the area of OCSE. Through this knowledge, recommended promising practices were developed. As this was an exploratory study there are some areas which require additional research in order to enhance the scope of these findings and their applicability more broadly. The following suggestions for future research are offered in two realms I) additional research and assessment of the recommended promising practices offered as part of this study and II) areas of research that require further exploration.

## I) Additional research and assessment of the recommended promising practices

While it is recognized that the recommended promising practices will be considered, implemented and evaluated based on the capacity and unique context of each country, agency, unit and/or individual, there is a need do a global follow-up in order to assess their impact and applicability. This will be carried out during Phase Three of the study.

In addition to this follow-up, there are several specific areas that currently stand as knowledge gaps and thus have been identified for further exploration. For example, findings from the study suggest that the pre-employment orientation and practices that are executed during the recruitment phase are very important, as expressed by those who experienced various degrees of pre-employment orientation, and by those who wished that they were better informed. A closer examination at these "suggested promising practices" during recruitment and the impact that they have on employees (and potentially on those who did not proceed with employment within an OCSE unit) would be of interest. A better understanding of what employees gained from the recruitment phase and pre-screening measures will allow employers to better address and meet employee needs. Relatedly, it would be of interest to further explore the military's use of pre-deployment stress inoculation training to see if there is an opportunity to introduce this preventative strategy within the context of OCSE units and to evaluate its effectiveness.

In an effort to explore potential mitigation strategies that minimize long term harm, future research should examine the impact of limited duration postings/tenures and the incorporation of a rotation of duties or assignments. Research in this area could again involve current employees, but also those who are no longer working in OCSE (or have moved on to a different role) in order to assess how these strategies may have impacted employees, in either a positive or negative way. It would also be of interest to further explore whether or not there is an ideal duration for working within an OCSE unit and gain a better understanding of the potential impacts of

transferring employees out of a unit before they feel they are ready to move on.

Relatedly, additional work is required to identify key topics that would be beneficial to cover in employee or manager training sessions and/or workshops. A number of suggested areas can be pulled from the study's findings as they relate to the changes that employees had experienced (for example, negative world view and hypervigilance). Topics related to building resiliency can also be evaluated, such as how to create a good work/home balance, how to make time for and prioritize self care, and how to manage stress. These topics can be further explored in order to identify and/or develop related training/workshops, and assess their effectiveness in terms of mitigating some of these impacts.

Lastly, there is recognition that the needs of and longer term impacts on former employees are unique. To address this, a number of recommended promising practices have been offered specifically for former employees. However, as this is a largely unexplored area there is a need for longitudinal research. It would be interesting to note the changes in terms of impacts that an employee experiences over time at a unit, and if/how those might transform once an employee leaves the unit. If someone stays in a unit for many years, how does their experience change and how do the impacts present themselves over time. Additionally, to what extent do health and wellness policies and agency

priorities impact wellbeing (positively or negatively) over time. This type of research will offer greater insight into how we can best support those employees throughout their career in a unit but also how to support those who no longer work within OCSE units, but are still feeling the impacts[55].

## II) Areas of research that require further exploration

The findings in this study yielded first-hand knowledge and insight into the realities of working in OCSE and the range of impacts (both positive and negative) that the work may have on employees. However, this preliminary finding also suggests that working in the area of OCSE can have an impact not only on those working directly in the field, but the impacts can potentially be experienced by family members as well. While it is recognized that there are still several gaps to address in order to fully understand the extent of the impacts on employees themselves, gaining a better understanding of the impacts on family members would also be of interest to explore. By integrating their perspectives, we might be able to identify ways to better support family members and identify ways in which they could in turn support their loved one. This would enhance the support system at home. Connecting with family members and seeking their input is a largely

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[55] It is recognized that there are challenges and limitations related to such a longitudinal study, in terms of access to and availability of the former employee demographic, and the number of variables that are more difficult to control for in this sample (for example, how their current situation may influence their perspective on past experiences).

unexplored avenue, and would serve to complement existing findings.

An additional area of research which warrants greater attention is the significance and impacts (positive and negative) of knowing the investigative outcomes/results of work. As very few studies have recognized investigative outcomes as a source of positive energy, in light of the current findings of this study, it would be beneficial to explore this further. This area of research would not only be of interest to law enforcement but also to industry partners and non-governmental organizations, to name a few.

Lastly, many participants had indicated that working in OCSE had contributed to attitude and behaviour changes such as negative world view and an overly protective behaviour towards children. These changes were not only experienced while working in the unit, but prolonged even after their departure. It may be worthwhile to explore whether the integration of positive interactions with kids (for example, joint events and activities and engaging in online safety and awareness sessions) would make a positive impact on employee wellbeing, both in the short term, and longer term (i.e. after departure). By integrating these more positive experiences within the work environment, employees will have the opportunity to shift their focus and attention to a more uplifting experience with children, rather than the constant reminder of the pain and suffering inflicted on them. This subsequent research could therefore look into whether these types of positive interactions with children have the ability to counter some of the more

negative effects of working in OCSE as it relates specifically to employees' attitudes and beliefs of the world, and how they engage with the children in their lives.

# Section 6. Conclusion

The findings from this study reaffirmed various observations from existing research and literature while bringing to light a number of new discoveries. The results and recommendations also demonstrate the need for a united approach. Maintaining employee health and wellness requires a delicate balance across multiple levels. While many of the strategies and practices are individual-based, there needs to be support and enforcement at the management and organizational levels. Individuals must adopt their own strategies and techniques to mitigate the unique stressors of their job in spite of any unit and agency initiatives that may already be in place. Personal ownership is critical. Furthermore, while it is recognized that there is some onus on the employee to practice self-care and build resiliency, managers and organizations play an important role in and have a responsibility to safeguard their employees.

Despite some participants corroborating the benefit of mandatory psychological assessments, results were mixed, as this was not an opinion that was uniformly shared. Even so, responses highlighted the benefit of having psychological assessments/counselling services, teamwork and peer support programs, pre-employment screenings, and health and wellness practices made available to employees. Management-related recommendations acknowledged that while managing stress levels and coping with job demands is commonly perceived as a personal undertaking, management should be actively involved in supporting the health and wellness of their employees. Findings indicated that having a health and wellness policy was not sufficient in itself, as enforcement was also proven to be a critical element. Management should make efforts to optimize the work environment to ensure that employees are equipped with the proper resources to meet the demands of their job, while also providing them with leadership, support and understanding. It is also critical that resources and support extends to employee's post-employment. Lastly, recommendations at the organization level recognize initiatives and practices that aim to improve the emotional, physical and psychological welfare of their employees. These include policies on mandatory assessments, provision of training and stress management programs, and the implementation of mitigation tools and techniques.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to seek feedback from former OCSE employees in terms of their experience while working in OCSE and the impacts of their work, as perceived, after leaving the unit. The results demonstrate that in some cases, the true extent of the impact of working in OCSE had not become apparent until some time later, and that there was a delayed onset of symptoms of stress. This highlights the need for ongoing support once an employee leaves an OCSE unit. Aside from this unique circumstance, generally the experiences as reported by former employees were found to be more similar than they were different, in comparison with current employees. However, based on a preliminary

comparison, current employees were more likely to recognize the importance of self-initiated activities, whereas former employees placed more emphasis on operational and organizational issues (for example, a lack of understanding from management or differential treatment).

It is recognized that the proposed recommendations will be evaluated and implemented based on the capacity and circumstances of the country, agency, unit and/or individual. Not all recommendations will meet the needs of any given organization or employee. As a result, it is hoped that the recommendations derived from this study will offer some guidance in strengthening health and wellness policies and practices among VGT member agencies, and beyond, as deemed appropriate. Additionally, the applicability and effectiveness of these recommendations will continue to be assessed through phase three of this study, which will inform the development of promising practices. As we move toward a more coordinated approach to safeguarding OCSE employees, we will be strengthening our global capacity to fight online child sexual exploitation. In order to serve and protect the most vulnerable – our children – we must ensure that we are taking care of ourselves, and each other.

Thank you to those who have dedicated their time in the past and to those who continue to dedicate themselves to the fight against online child sexual exploitation. Whether you actively investigate or provide operational support in any capacity, please recognize that you are making a difference in child protection.

We also thank those who continue to support the research in this important area. To quote one study participant:

> *Thank you for taking an active research role in this field of study. I think that the investigators doing this type of work dedicate themselves to saving the victims that our own well being is often overlooked, not thought about, or is inadequately dealt with. I hope to see positive changes in the approach to helping people cope with any negative feelings they may have in this line of work.*
>
> -Anonymous participant

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# Appendix A: List of Recommendations for Current and Former Employees

## VGT Recommendations of Promising Practices for Current Online Child Sexual Exploitation (OCSE) Employees

### I) Individual-based Initiatives and Strategies to Minimize and Mitigate Stress for OCSE Employees

| | |
|---|---|
| i. Viewing strategies | • Adopt a 'Gradual Exposure to CSEM' Technique<br>• Viewing CSEM in Alternative Size/Thumbnail Size<br>• Viewing CSE Videos without Sound<br>• Mental Preparation before a Viewing Session<br>• Taking Breaks<br>• If Possible, Avoid Working on Cases in Isolation and Avoid Working on Cases that Involve Child Victims of Similar Age or Similar Features to Children Related to the Employee<br>• Adopting a Consistent Viewing Time During Shift<br>• Not Viewing Near the End of the Day/Ending the Work Day on a Positive Note |
| ii. Psychological/ Counselling Services | • Mandatory Psychological Assessments<br>• Access to Private/Independent Psychologists<br>• Pre-employment Screenings for Potential Candidates |
| iii. Personal Coping Strategies | • Physical Exercise<br>• Eating and Sleeping Well<br>• Humour<br>• Hobbies and Leisure Activities |
| iv. Social Support | • Colleague Support<br>• Family Support<br>• Team Approach/Positive Working Environment |

### II) Management Initiatives and Strategies to Help Reduce Stress for OCSE Employees

| | |
|---|---|
| i. Health and Wellness Policy/Stress Management Programs | • Establishing a Health and Wellness Policy<br>• Implementation of a Health and Wellness Policy<br>• Implementation of Mandatory Assessments (Quarterly, Biannually, and Annually)<br>• Seeking Experienced Clinicians<br>• Implementation of Mitigation Techniques, Strategies and Training<br>• Understanding and Supporting Employee Needs |
| ii. Size of Investigation Team | • Ensuring an Appropriately-sized Team to Handle the Workload<br>• Ensure Appropriate Employee Workload |
| iii. Optimization of Work Environment | • Appropriate Technical Equipment<br>• Optimal Working Area/Environment<br>• Rest Areas |
| iv. Resources | • Financial Resources<br>• Human Resources |
| v. Organizational Support | • Training<br>• Support for Employees in Special Circumstances<br>• Supportive Supervision<br>• Equal Opportunity<br>• Work Schedule Flexibility<br>• Feedback on Case Files |

### III) Organizational Initiatives and Strategies for Optimal Performance within OCSE Units

| | |
|---|---|
| i. Mandatory Health and Wellness Policy | • Orientation Session for New Employees<br>• Mandatory Implementation of Health and Wellness Policy<br>• Mandatory Enforcement of Health and Wellness Policy<br>• Implementation of Mandatory Psychological Assessments (as Per Policy Standard)<br>• Mandatory Health and Wellness Training for Management |
| ii. Implementation of Stress Management Programs and Resources | • On-site Private/Independent Health Practitioner<br>• Implementation of In-unit Wellness Programs and Initiatives<br>• Development of Peer-to-Peer Support Programs<br>• Mandatory Debriefing Sessions/Open-door Policy<br>• Implementation of Mentorship Programs<br>• Support Program(s) for Family and Friends of OCSE Employees<br>• On-site Gym Facilities |
| iii. Implementation of Mitigation Tools and Techniques | • Physical Group Activity Sessions<br>• Meditation and Mindfulness Workshops<br>• Wellness Library Program |

## VGT Recommendations of Promising Practices for Former Online Child Sexual Exploitation (OCSE) Employees

I) Individual-based Initiatives and Strategies to Minimize and Mitigate Stress for Former OCSE Employees

**i. Support Group for Former OCSE Employees**

II) Management Initiatives and Strategies to Help Reduce Stress for Former OCSE Employees

| **i. Mandatory Exit Assessment** | <ul><li>Phasing-Out Period in ICE Unit</li><li>Post-Employment Debriefing Sessions</li><li>Support for Former Employees</li><li>Support for Families of Former Employees</li></ul> |
| --- | --- |

III) Organizational Initiatives and Strategies for Optimal Performance within OCSE Units

**i. Staffing Opportunities in Management Positions within OCSE Units**

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