**A Study of Trauma and Resiliency among
Forensic Examiners Investigating Child Pornography**

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Background
Since the expansion of the Internet in the mid-1990s, a growing number of law enforcement cases have involved the possession, distribution and production of child pornography (CP). Because these cases involve computers and the Internet, they require examiners and investigators with specialized technical expertise and equipment. Consequently, many CP investigations are handled by specialized law enforcement units, such as the 61 Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Forces. These task forces and affiliated agencies encompass over 7,000 investigators[1] who, in the course of handling cases of Internet-related child sexual exploitation, may be exposed to considerable quantities of CP that graphically portrays rape and child sexual abuse.[2] These images can be extremely disturbing because they violate strongly held standards of ethical behavior and depict egregious, offensive and disturbing acts involving child victims. Recent research from the Cybertipline estimates that nearly one million child sexual abuse images were being flagged on the Internet each month by law enforcement in 2017, and the rate had been growing at 51% per year.[3] The proportion of material comprised of videos has been increasing at a much faster rate than still images and is creating a burden on law enforcement who are required to review this material.[3] There is extensive concern among law enforcement that viewing such material may have corrosive effects on investigators' mental health.[4,5]

Goals of the study
The present study seeks to understand the impact and management of stress, burnout, and vicarious trauma in order to advance resiliency among forensic scientists and police investigators.

The specific objectives of the CP Examiner Trauma & Resiliency Study are to:
- Gather information about agency-level practices and training that may mitigate trauma and promote resilience among forensic examiners exposed to CP.
- Characterize the extent of forensic examiner CP exposure across three domains of influence: a) severity of the images, b) frequency of viewing images, and c) quantity of images viewed.

- Understand the impact of CP exposure on investigator stress, physical health, mental health and relationships.
- Establish whether and how individual- and agency-level factors buffer the impact of exposure to CP images on investigator stress, health and relationships.
- Develop a screening instrument to help agencies assess staff suitability for investigations requiring exposure to CP.

Methodology

We will use an online data collection strategy to gather detailed, confidential data from a sample of forensic examiners who work with child pornography (CP) images. Forensic examiners will be drawn from ICAC Task Forces and affiliate agencies and a comparison sample of investigators working other types of child sexual exploitation crimes drawn from the same agencies. In addition, we will gather information about agency-level practices that may be associated with trauma and resiliency.

Impact of the study

Findings will help strengthen law enforcement well-being, improve investigative practices and inform public policy by examining the effect of work-related exposure to CP on forensic examiners and the efforts to help protect them from negative health impact.

References

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