

“IN THIS LINE OF WORK, BOUNDARIES ARE IMPORTANT”: OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND THE WELL-BEING OF COMMUNITY PAROLE OFFICERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed how correctional systems, including parole processes, work and function. As essential workers, parole officers continued to work through the pandemic, despite the upheaval to their typical occupational routines. Through these challenging times, they worked to meet the needs of parolees; yet, the challenges brought on by the pandemic caused considerable stress and created new occupational risks and vulnerabilities. Drawing on interviews with 54 community parole officers in Canada, this paper identifies these challenges and stressors. Specifically, we identify three COVID-19 related occupational stressors salient across interviewees' narratives: (1) Changes to workload, routines, and work-life boundaries; (2) Effects of decarceration policies; and (3) Navigating support and supervision in the face of added health risks and reduced ability to interact with clients. Drawing on studies of occupational stress in community correctional work, we make several recommendations for correctional services in building a resilient (post) pandemic parole system.

Keywords: pandemic; parole; health; COVID-19

Résumé. La pandémie de la COVID-19 a considérablement modifié la façon dont les systèmes correctionnels, y compris les processus de libération conditionnelle, se déroulent et fonctionnent. En tant que travailleurs de première ligne, les agents de libération conditionnelle ont continué à travailler pendant la pandémie, malgré le bouleversement de leurs routines professionnelles typiques. Les défis posés par la pandémie ont causé un stress considérable et créé de nouveaux risques et vulnérabilités professionnels. S'appuyant sur des entre-

vues avec plus de 54 agents de libération conditionnelle au Canada, cet article identifie ces défis et facteurs de stress. Plus précisément, nous identifions trois facteurs de stress professionnels liés à la COVID-19 qui ressortent des récits des personnes interrogées : (1) les changements dans la charge de travail, les routines, et les délimitations entre le travail et la vie ; (2) politiques de décarcération ; et (3) navigation dans le soutien et la supervision face à des risques accrus pour la santé et à une capacité réduite à interagir avec les clients. En nous appuyant sur des études sur le stress professionnel dans le travail correctionnel communautaire, nous formulons plusieurs recommandations pour les services correctionnels dans la construction d'un système de libération conditionnelle résilient (après) la pandémie.

Mots clés: pandémie; parole; santé; COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant implications for Canada's federal parole system, and in particular the working conditions and realities of the more than 1,200 federal parole officers who work for *Correctional Service of Canada* (CSC) (CSC, 2019a). Public health restrictions established to curb the spread of COVID-19 resulted in changes to the work routines of community parole officers (CPOs) with implications for their workloads and responsibilities, their mental health and well-being, and their ability to supervise and support those under their care. While considerable scholarly attention has been directed toward the impact of COVID-19 in prisons—rightly so given the transmission risks associated with congregate living settings (Kinner et al., 2020) and the social and health vulnerabilities of prisoners (Barnert et al., 2020; Maycock, 2021; Nowotny, Seide & Brinkley-Rubinstein, 2021; Ricciardelli et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2020)—less attention has been directed toward how COVID-19 has altered the work of correctional workers, especially those of parole officers.

We explore CPOs' working realities during COVID-19 against the backdrop of broader political calls toward 'decarceration,' a term denoting "alternatives to incarceration, such as serving sentences in the community rather than in prison, as well as the premature conclusion of a criminal sentence, and the aggregate reduction in the prison population" (Ricciardelli et al., 2021, p. 495). Within the first weeks of the pandemic, Canada's Minister of Public Safety asked that CSC and the Parole Board of Canada (PBC) "consider early release for some federal inmates to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 behind bars" (Har-

ris, 2021, para. 1). However, despite the request, and broader calls to mitigate the damaging effects of COVID-19 on prisoner populations (Burki, 2020), the number of exceptional releases in the federal correctional system was minimal (Parole Board of Canada, 2021; Ricciardelli et al., 2021). To be more specific, the PBC (2021) indicates that between March, 2020 and April, 2021, “13 parole by exception cases have been granted and 9 are pending decision, compared to only 7 parole by exception cases for all of last fiscal year, of which 4 were granted.” While requests for decarceration had little effect on the number of early releases, our data show how such requests and broader calls for ‘decarceration’ re-shaped POs’ work, creating additional stressors which included increased concern for their clients who hoped to be released early, but which seldom happened (cf. Norman & Ricciardelli, in press).

This paper is structured as follows: we begin by providing further context about COVID-19 and the Canadian correctional system and reviewing the literature on stress in community correctional work, before proceeding with an overview of the methods. In the empirical sections we explore how the COVID-19 pandemic affected CPOs’ work. We show how this group of essential workers experienced the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and related occupational stressors relating to changing work routines and the erosion of work-life boundaries, the impact of decarceration efforts on workloads, and the challenges of supervising and supporting parolees. We conclude with a discussion of the study’s contributions, limitations, and wider policy impact.

COMMUNITY CORRECTIONAL WORK

CSC is the federal organization that manages the incarceration and community supervision of persons serving sentences of two years or more (Ricciardelli, 2014, 2019). CPOs are responsible for the community supervision and support of persons conditionally released from prison who are given the opportunity to serve the remainder of their sentence in the community. As has been well-documented, parolees typically face a lot of uncertainty in addition to several structural barriers that shape their reentry process (Durnescu, 2019; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2009; Maier, 2020; McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2021; Ricciardelli & Mooney, 2017). Working with parolees in these circumstances, CPOs are asked to serve dual roles of supervision (i.e., monitoring the parolee to ensure they are abiding by their conditions of release) and support (i.e., assisting parolees with accessing rehabilitative supports

that will assist their successful community reintegration) (Ostermann & Hyatt, 2021).

Recently, a small number of studies have started to examine the effects of COVID-19 on the lives of those under community supervision and the parole or probation officers who supervise them. For example, Casey et al. (2021) examined how the “pervasive punishment” of community supervision (cf. McNeill, 2019) was exacerbated by the pandemic. Other scholars have written about how changes to probation or parole officers’ routines in response to pandemic-related restrictions (e.g., the move toward remote telephone and remote supervision) have created both benefits and drawbacks to their work (Dominey, 2021; Schwalbe & Koetzle, 2021; Sturm et al., 2021). In Canada, Norman and Ricciardelli (in press) found that parole officers based in federal prisons, referred to as institution parole officers, experienced heightened occupational stress and navigated new risks during the pandemic. And finally, Phillips et al. (2021) analyzed how probation officers in England and Wales had their work-life boundaries blurred while performing duties at home, particularly if children were present (Phillips et al., 2021). These studies provide early insights into the effects of COVID-19 on community correctional workers’ lives. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 54 CPOs, this article adds to this growing body of literature by offering insight into how the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic affected their workloads and responsibilities, their ability to both supervise and support the parolees on their caseloads, and their own mental health and well-being. In so doing, we make theoretical contributions to the literatures on parole and probation officer stress and mental health, as well as the emergent understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected community correctional systems.

Researchers recognize that community correctional workers experience various stressors related to both operational and organizational factors. Operational stressors include concerns about risks to personal safety (Finn & Kuck, 2005; Lewis, Lewis & Garby, 2013) and the cumulative effects of vicarious exposure to potentially psychologically traumatic materials (Goldhill, 2019; Norman & Ricciardelli, 2021; Page & Robertson, 2021; Rhineberger-Dunn, Mack & Baker, 2016; Severson & Pettus-Davis, 2013; Westaby, Phillips, & Fowler, 2016). Commonly-identified organizational stressors include high workloads (arising from administrative tasks, large caseloads, and unpredictable or inflexible deadlines), low staffing levels (e.g., lack of backfill), and conflicts with management or colleagues (DeMichele & Payne, 2007; Finn & Kuck, 2005; Norman & Ricciardelli, 2021; O’Donnell & Stephens, 2001;

Phillips, Westaby & Fowler, 2016; Slate & Johnson, 2013; Whitehead & Lindquist, 1985). Organizational and operational stressors can intersect and accumulate, ultimately leading to “spillover” that damages parole or probation workers’ ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance (Westaby, Phillips, & Fowler, 2016). Focused on the unique context of parole during the COVID-19 pandemic, the current article adds to the body of scholarship on tensions and stresses in community correctional work by examining how the working conditions engendered by the pandemic exacerbated existing occupational stressors and affected the well-being of Canadian federal community parole officers.

METHODS

This paper is based on data collected as part of a broader study on occupational stress and well-being among federal parole officers who worked in the community or in correctional institutions. The study was commissioned and funded by the Union for Safety and Justice Employees (USJE), the union representing federal parole officers. Ethics approval for the study was received from Memorial University of Newfoundland’s Research Ethics Board (#20201495). Recruitment was conducted with the assistance of USJE and CSC, both of which sent study information in English and French to parole officers via internal listservs. In total, 150 parole officers agreed to be interviewed, of whom 54 (36%) worked in the community and are included in the sample used for this article.

Most participants ($n=52$; 96.3%) took part in one-on-one telephone interviews, which were held in English. The remainder ($n=2$; 3.7%) participated in one of two French-language group interviews, which were professionally translated in real-time. French-language group interviews were used due to the cost of hiring translators. Due to the difficulty of coordinating participant schedules, the group interviews included both community parole officers ($n=2$) and institutional parole officers ($n=3$); while the discussions often focused on similarities between these roles, the interviewer ensured that participants could speak about the unique aspects of their position.

Interviews were semi-structured, and were approximately one to two hours in length. Interviews were conducted over the phone, due to the broad geographic distribution of participants and COVID-19 public health restrictions. One advantage of this approach is that research has shown that telephone interviews may allow participants to feel more comfortable discussing sensitive or difficult topics (Mealer & Jones,

2014; Novick, 2008). As such, telephone interviews may have allowed participants to more easily discuss challenging occupational experiences and their resultant mental health impacts. Interviews were conducted between August and October, 2020 and thus occurred following the ‘first wave’ of COVID-19 infections in Canada, which peaked in early May at 2,760 new cases per day (CBC News, 2021). Data collection was concluded at a time when the number of COVID-19 cases started to rise toward the much larger ‘second wave,’ which peaked in January, 2021. As a result, our data are limited by the fact that that participants were discussing the effects of the pandemic at its early stages, without knowing the subsequent increased rates of transmission and emergence of COVID-19 variants that would ultimately occur.

Members of the research team transcribed and open coded the interviews to determine emergent themes, guided by a semi-grounded constructed approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). To ensure inter-rater reliability, three members of the research team independently and sequentially coded five transcripts to develop an initial set of codes. As the remainder of transcripts were subsequently coded by the research team, the initial codes were refined and new ones were identified as they emerged from interview data. The transcripts were autocoded and sorted into primary (parent nodes), secondary (child nodes), and tertiary (grandchild nodes) themes with the assistance of QRS NVivo software, and axial coding was used to make connections between and further organize themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Prior to participating in an interview, participants were asked to complete a survey on detailed their demographic characteristics and occupational experience. Most participants (94.4%; $n=51$) were working as community parole officers at the time of the interview, while the remainder had recent experience as community parole officers but were working as parole supervisors ($n=2$; 3.7%) or on a temporary assignment at CSC National Headquarters (1; $n=1.9\%$). Most participants worked at a parole office ($n=48$; 88.9%), while a small number ($n=5$; 9.3%) were employed at CSC-run residential facilities called Community Correctional Centres (CCCs). Participants’ occupational tenure with CSC ranged from two to 28 years; with a median of 12.5 years. The sample included community parole officers working in seven provinces and all three territories, with Ontario ($n=14$; 25.9%), British Columbia ($n=11$; 20.4%), and Manitoba ($n=9$; 16.7%) the most frequent provinces/territories of employment. We summarize participants’ basic demographic information in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant demographics

| Gender | Participants (n) |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Female | 39 |
| Male | 14 |
| No answer | 1 |
| Age | |
| 25-34 | 6 |
| 35-44 | 25 |
| 45-54 | 15 |
| 55-64 | 7 |
| no answer | 1 |
| Race | |
| Aboriginal | 1 |
| Afro-Caribbean-Canadian | 1 |
| Black | 3 |
| Chinese | 3 |
| South Asian | 3 |
| White | 42 |
| Other | 1 |

RESULTS

Our analysis of community parole officers' discussions of the COVID-19 pandemic identified three predominant themes: (1) changes to workloads and routines engendered by telework, and resultant erosion of work-home boundaries; (2) challenges created by top-down pressure for decarceration, increasing CPOs' workloads and frustration; and (3) challenges to in supervising and supporting o parolees in the context of public health restrictions. While we focus on the experiences of CPOs during the pandemic, many participants also discussed the difficulties faced by parolees, thereby highlighting how the challenges faced correctional worker and criminalized peoples may be intertwined.

Changing workloads, routines, and the erosion of work-home boundaries

Participants described how the COVID-19 pandemic created significant changes to their daily work routines. CSC typically expected community parole officers to spend most of their time at parole offices, Community Correctional Centres, or in the community, but with the onset

of COVID-19, participants were forced to pivot to completing much of their work at home, which was a new experience with new stressors. Participant 49 provided an example of how community parole officers' work routines were altered by the pandemic:

They only want one person a day, pretty much, in the office. And if you have to go in, you have to sign up because they want to make sure there's not too many people there. So even if you're just popping in to grab a file, they want you to sign up. So, if there's five people there, they're like okay, well someone has to, you know, go. They don't want people in the office. Same with when you have to see [parolees]. You're supposed to see them in person. With COVID, half the time you're allowed to talk to them on the phone and not see them in person.

As participant 49 demonstrates, most community parole officers completed the majority of their work at home while access to parole offices as well face-to-face contact with parolees was affected by public health measures adopted by CSC. For some participants, these new work arrangements allowed them to work more efficiently in less hectic and distracting environments. As participants 46 notes:

Having even two days a week at home [to] just focus on the reports and case records and all the typing that you can't get done [is beneficial]. In the office you're constantly being interrupted. [Telework] is invaluable right now. (Participant 46)

However, despite some perceived advantages of telework for specific job tasks, participants identified a range of stressors associated with working from home, affecting both their home life and their occupational responsibilities. For example, parents of young children noted that because of school and daycare closures they faced challenges juggling work responsibilities with childminding. Participant 5 stated:

I found it really, really stressful when the kids were doing their home-schooling and I was doing working from home, it was really difficult.... When the kids are around I don't want to talk about sensitive things on the phone or have little ears listening, you know? So, I'm trying to work around everybody else, instead of just having my office.

Navigating work and caretaking responsibilities was a difficult challenge for many people in the pandemic, but in these difficulties were exacerbated by the "sensitive" nature of parole work. Participant 22, elaborated on the challenges of meeting parolees on the phone in the presence of her children:

We've got our kids at home, so that's a dynamic that makes it interesting when you're... talking to sex offenders, and about violence, and all sorts of things that they shouldn't know anything about. So, there's kind of a boundary thing there, which, you know, in this line of work, boundaries are important.

This difficulty in maintaining a boundary between work and home was echoed across community parole officers. Such discussions often referred to how work was "bleeding" into their homes:

For me, being in the office, that's my line, [that's how] I separate my work from my home.... Having to work from home, and having my children here while I have to talk a guy in from the ledge, for me that bleeds into my home life. And I don't particularly like that.... I mean, some of the offenders on my caseload know I have children and I don't have any concerns with that; other offenders on my caseload don't know, and I don't want them to know. But I can't keep that [boundary]. My work is bleeding into my home.... I don't particularly like it because my house, my family, my children is my safe zone, and I don't feel like I have it right now. (Participant 33)

Participant 33 reflections demonstrate the mental health toll that telework placed on community parole officers. For her, the work arrangements imposed by the pandemic removed the boundaries she had constructed to protect her work-life balance, prevent the intrusion of difficult or sensitive occupational tasks into her home life, and maintain her family's privacy. These changes created new vulnerabilities and compromised her sense of safety.

Telework also changed the workload for community parole officers. Participant 132, for example, found that, with only restricted access to her office, completing paperwork in a timely manner was stressful: "when you're in the office four times a month, you got to rush to get all the paperwork done [because]... it has to be done in the office. So, I think that is very challenging." Other participants faced technological challenges as they transitioned to telework. Participant 75 explained that in their region, to prevent the electronic system from being overloaded, "we were only allowed [remote] access to our... casework records and everything... from 7:00 AM till 9:00 AM... We couldn't do our work in that time." Community parole officers pointed to such stressors in suggesting that increased feelings of chaos and disorganization made staying on top of their tasks difficult: "I feel more disorganized, I don't feel like I have a good grasp on what's going on in my caseload, but nobody cares" (Participant 33). Participant 84 summar-

ized the impact of diverse challenges on her workload and stress levels as follows:

Every single thing that needs to be done takes longer, because people are not as accessible, they're working at home, they aren't as readily accessible by different forms of technology.... The workload has gone up exponentially.... At the beginning of COVID, for the first couple of months as we were trying to get procedures in place, this is no exaggeration, I would work from 8:00 in the morning until 10:00 at night, non-stop.

As these statements indicate, community parole officers felt increased stress from various new challenges that arose due to the pandemic, and often had to navigate these new occupational realities with little or no guidance or support.

Decarceration

Participants talked about the effects of CSC's decarceration efforts on their workloads and how the push to decarcerate created new stressors and frustrations. Specifically, community parole officers felt frustrated by what they perceived as a top-down push for decarceration that was neither coordinated nor attentive to their working realities during these trying times. Such feelings were compounded by the fact that requests for early release were rarely successful. Participant 57, a parole supervisor, provided insight into the challenges faced by her staff as they tried to comply with decarceration efforts:

It kind of seems like they've been rushed and without really planning. Like, we had to relocate one [parolee], for example, because the release plan wasn't well structured.... We had to immediately move him out of there [out of public safety concerns] when we realized where he had been placed. So my experience hasn't been positive with early or other forms of release due to COVID.

Decarceration, as this participant's narrative shows, has implications for prisoners' reentry and supervision in the community. Managing the release process required considerable work and coordination on the part of community parole officers who struggled with the increased workload as a result of decarceration policies and pressures. As another community parole officer, Participant 107, said: "we've definitely been getting more requests for reports for guys coming out [of prison]," while participant 95 noted that decarceration "created a whole tonne of work for us." Participant 82 also felt that decarceration policies—again

perceived as a policy imposed from above—conflicted with the professional judgement of community parole officers:

Management directives [are to] get these guys out, where the parole officers are saying but we still need to do a proper risk assessment. Then we get requests for guys to come out on day parole, day parole other, or full parole that they're not ready for. But they're [applying for early release and] their reason is 'but COVID.' And to me 'but COVID' is not a good risk management plan

As these accounts reveal, decarceration affected community parole officers' workload, adding to the already stressful working conditions created by the pandemic. For participants who were concerned about the supervision and supports of released prisoners, decarceration felt largely disorganized and disconnected from their working realities and the supervision and reentry supports available in the community. All of these factors created added frustration and concern about their ability to perform their job duties of supervision, risk assessment, and support.

Navigating Supervision and Support

Parole work is marked by a tension between the supervision and support of parolees. The wide-ranging effects of lockdowns and other pandemic-related public health measures were felt acutely by community parole officers who struggled to balance these twin demands. Many participants felt that the limits placed on in-person meetings - particularly visits to the homes of parolees - compromised their ability to make confident assessments of parolees' behaviour. Participant 82 stated that "because we're not allowed to go into homes [and] it's harder to assess potential risk." Participant 129 similarly noted that "seeing the home of the parolee can make us know how he is in his head.... So, I feel like we were kind of missing a bit of information by not going there." Here, community parole officers were speaking to feeling compromised in their ability to assess how well their clients were managing their re-entry because they were shielded from seeing their living conditions. Participant 132 lamented the inability to observe parolees' bodily cues: "we can't see their facial reactions, [so] we don't really know for sure what's going on." As these participants make clear, despite finding some creative ways to see parolees in a safe environment (see Participant 5 above), many community parole officers considered in-person interactions, especially home visits, vital to their effective supervision of parolees. Thus, they felt the effects of not having the same level of access to and interaction with parolees. Participant 22

explained the challenges of supervision in the absence of direct face-to-face contact when sharing that:

[There is a] huge assessment piece being missed when we do our community assessments.... You missed the whole component of seeing people in their natural environment, where they are more likely to maybe share.... It also makes it difficult to have certain conversations when you're standing outside on the street corner. You're not really talking about how they're managing their conditions and, you know, [with] sex offenders how they are managing their urges and whatnot.

As participant 22 explains, for community parole officers home visits can be both a vital part of supervising a parolee *and* meeting them in “their natural environment” where they are more likely to engage openly. These sentiments were echoed by participant 96, who missed “that extra element of being able to meet them in their home, and if they live with someone with their community supports, and having those open conversations.... That was crucial to building rapport and getting a sense of how well they're doing.”

The potentially harmful effects for parolees who could not access their usual community supports were also voiced by community parole officers. As Participant 82 stated:

The resources aren't available. Our programs weren't happening for a while. And even now program is only happening over the phone, so it's very hard to tell if that's even effective or not.... There's a lot of barriers, and then they are stuck at the halfway house you know for days on end, and that's not mentally healthy for anyone.

Community parole officers were limited in the support that they could provide to parolees. This situation that could be particularly damaging for those who relied on their parole officer for support and guidance. In essence, many community parole officers felt unable to perform their occupational responsibilities to the extent they felt their work demanded, which included being able to “be there” for their clients. Participant 84 noted that some parolees:

Have developed a really strong rapport with us, and don't always have a good strong family support....[In those cases] we are their first line of problem solving. So when the money starts running short, when they lose their jobs because of COVID, when they start to experience health concerns, when they can't get to the store to get their groceries, for some of our offenders we're the ones they call. So we're not only their parole officer in some cases we're their primary source of support.

As participant 84's statement demonstrates, the support role played by community parole officers could intensify during the pandemic, as clients suffered from the impacts of COVID-19 on their re-entry processes, specifically their ability to acquire employment and meet their daily needs. Here, socially vulnerable parolees were seen as lacking their usual resources, thus intensifying their reliance on the supports that their parole officer provides. However, their parole officer was less visible, unable to meet in person, and restricted in their ability to provide the normative supports in ways clients were accustomed prior to the pandemic.

Several community parole officers linked these pandemic-related challenges to instances in which parolees on their caseload breached their release conditions. Participant 82 added: "I think the offenders that have breached [are] because of the stress of COVID," a sentiment echoed by participant 100, who described returning a parolee to prison because "the supports that he needs just weren't happening, and he wasn't able to do things online...and so he breached and he went back." As they were concerned for the well-being of the people on their caseload, their clients' increased vulnerabilities and risk of breaches added an additional level of stress and difficulty to the job of parole officer. Such stresses had possible negative implications for their own well-being. As interviewees' narratives reveal, community parole officers were concerned that the lack of in-person support, coupled with the disappearance of other support systems in the community, affected their clients' well-being and legal futures.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we demonstrate the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on community parole officers' occupational realities and stressors. While telework made certain job tasks easier for some CPOs, for many working from home created new challenges. These new stressors were especially noted where community parole officers' carefully-constructed boundaries between work and home were eroded, causing sensitive work to "spillover" into their home and family lives (cf. Phillips et al., 2021). This constituted a particular concern for community parole officers, especially those with children, given that "dirty work" (Hughes, 1958) is an occupational reality for community correctional workers (Westaby et al., 2016; Worrall et al., 2013).

Community parole officers reported increased workloads during the pandemic, while feeling their ability to supervise and support ex-pris-

oners on their caseload was significantly impeded. Limited in-person visits and reduced ability to have meaningful conversations with parolees in environments where they felt most comfortable reduced both the level of surveillance and support experienced by parolees. In turn, this created new challenges for community parole officers when making informed risk assessments; assessments that have always been highly discretionary and potentially detrimental to the supports and freedom of clients. Community parole officers were also conscious of the lack of wider supports in the community and the implications of the lack of contact and supports for parolees' well-being, including their ability to comply with their conditions of release. For parolees, COVID-19 exacerbated their "pains of supervision" (Durnescu, 2019; McNeill, 2019). For officers, it created challenges in providing support and could force them to make decisions to return their parolees to prison for reasons rooted in structural barriers rather than individual actions.

Decarceration efforts resulted in additional work demands on community parole officers at a time of heightened stress, notwithstanding the fact that decarceration efforts resulted in relatively few successful applications for early or exceptional release. This suggests that future decarceration efforts must involve liaising with frontline services and community supports to ensure that people who are released early are still provided with the necessary supervision and treatment supports. It was also the case that 'parole by exception' was not a process with which more parole officers were familiar. Thus, they had to learn new administrative processes and procedures, which in itself increased workloads and, for some, discomfort inherent in navigating new, often burdensome, administrative tasks.

Overall, the data show that COVID-19 made community parole officers' work more challenging and stressful. Participants felt that some organizational reactions to the pandemic, such as decarceration, created new stresses that affected their well-being. Meanwhile, new public health measures such as physical distancing and lock downs, although necessary for public health, created barriers to care and support provision for prisoners and parolees.

We recommend that the managers and employers of community parole officers be attentive to the struggles that such workers are having in accommodating these new remote working conditions, and that their connection to clients be reinstated as soon as possible within the allowances of public health measures. Community parole officers are experiencing work-life imbalance and suffering from the difficulties in separating home and work brought on by telework within the pandemic. There must be efforts to enforce boundaries between occupational work

and private living, which need to be respected and adhered by all those within the officers circle of employment. Community correctional work does not occur in a vacuum, it is a societal process, impacting society and communities. Thus, within the context of COVID-19, public health policies must be adhered to maintain health and safety, but also, and not to be forgotten, parolees require supports for their successful reintegration into society and desistance from crime. More must be done to ensure they are receiving such necessary supports and not in such a way that the mental health and well-being of officers is forced to be compromised. To this end, flexibility with working conditions is necessary, as is understanding from employers, and clients. The reality is that the well-being of community parole officers fluctuates in tandem with that of their clients – they worry for the well-being of their clients – and thus they too require an increase in mental health supports that includes access to treatment when necessary.

The current study is not without limitations. Interviews were conducted after Canada's 'first wave,' but before the future waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus limiting the temporal focus to the pandemic's first few months. Our participants were living in a state of uncertainty as to what was to come next and unprepared for the the pandemic's extensive impact. Further, community parole officers self-selected for the study and the online recruitment process, as well as the distribution and return of demographic surveys and consent documents, may have deterred potential participants. The research team worked to accommodate participant interest in a timely manner, as interviews were requested at great speed after the recruitment materials were distributed; as such, despite conducting interviews with 54 participants, we were not able to speak with each interested person. Moreover, as is the case with all qualitative research, caution is necessary when generalizing results beyond our sample. In spite of these limitations, the current study offers novel and rich data on the experiences of community parole officers as they navigated new or exacerbated occupational challenges during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Due to the nature of their jobs, community parole officers experience various distinctive occupational stressors. The global pandemic exacerbated many of these stresses while creating new workplace routines, parolee needs, and occupational challenges. Cumulatively, these changes affected the health and well-being, on the job and in their homes, of

a group of workers who could not pause their work due to its essential nature, and who instead had to find strategies to keep themselves and their clients safe and well.

More research is queried on the impact of COVID-19 on community correctional workers' well-being beyond the early stages of the pandemic. Given the reported benefits and challenges of their work during the pandemic, but also the likely long-term impact of COVID-19 on correctional systems, it is important that correctional services carefully consider the nuances of frontline workers' experiences in building a (post-)pandemic parole system that is resilient, supportive, and inclusive of parole officers' working realities and the experiences of parolees subjected to community supervision.

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