

“Wading through the worst that humanity does to each other”

Crown Prosecutors’ Experiences of Engaging with Potentially Traumatic Material and Emotions

Rachel Kim supervised by Dr Nichola Tyler and Professor Yvette Tinsley



Introduction

There are limited studies on the impact of working with potentially traumatic material (PTM) among criminal lawyers. The small number of studies indicate lawyers are **occupationally at risk of being affected by working with PTM and report negative symptoms.** *

Crown prosecutors (CPs) have distinct occupational exposure to trauma, due to:

- High caseloads of serious criminal cases (higher trauma content)
- Working with traumatised and vulnerable complainants/victims.

However, no research has explored the experiences of this group in their work with PTM

objective

“ To investigate Crown prosecutors’ experiences of working with potentially traumatic material and emotions in their roles.

Ethical Considerations

Research approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee.

- Written consent of participants
- Ensuring confidentiality of data (e.g. pseudonym and redaction of identifying data)
- Participant and researcher well-being

Method & Analysis

Participants

- 19 practising Crown prosecutors across four Crown solicitor firms
- Consisting of 7 males and 12 females; 9 junior, 4 intermediate and 6 senior prosecutors

Materials

- Semi-structured interviews ranging 42 minutes to 2.5 hours (average 57 minutes)
- Interviews conducted via Zoom

Procedure

- Interviews transcribed verbatim
- Identifying information removed

Data Analysis

- Reflexive Thematic Analysis, consisting of six stages

Key Findings

- CPs experienced negative symptoms (e.g. recurring intrusive imagery, heightened paranoia) that ranged in persistence and severity.
- Workplace and personal factors both protected and exacerbated these negative symptoms.
- These findings add to the limited qualitative research that criminal lawyers are an at-risk population from their occupational exposure to PTM.
- There is a better need to understand and address the impact of working with PTM and its detrimental and potentially long-lasting impacts.
- CPs carry out an integral role in the criminal justice system. There is an overarching duty of care to ensure they are not working to their own detriment. †



Link to published article



Link to thesis

* Levin, A. P., and Greisberg, S. (2003). Vicarious trauma in attorneys. *Pace Law Rev.* 24, 245–252.
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Weir, P., Jones, L., and Sheeran, N. (2021). Australian lawyers’ experience of exposure to traumatic material: A qualitative study. *Psychiatry Psychol. Law* 28, 363–381.

† Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual. Res. Psychol.* 3, 77–101.
Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Newcastle upon Tyne: SAGE.