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First Responders and Mental Health

By

Anthony Locatelli

ABSTRACT.

This research proposal focuses on mental health issues facing first responders due to their line of work. Topics that are addressed in this paper include the awareness of mental health and different programs that have been created to help first responders deal with work-related stressors and problems. A proposed study seeks to gain more information from first responders to create support resources and programs to ensure that first responders are getting the best quality care for their situations. The goal of this paper is not just to increase access to support resources to help first responders, but also to inform the public of the seriousness of first responder mental health, since they are the emergency personnel that care for all us in the community.

INTRODUCTION

When the people we care most for are injured or having some kind of medical emergency, the first thing we do is call 911 to get help from the right people for the job. These people are known as first responders and these responders can be Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), Paramedics, Firefighters, and in some cases Police Officers. First responders have one of the most stressful and physically demanding jobs in the world with trying to handle multi casualty incidents where the scene involves multiple patients and other types of incidents with hazardous materials that cause harm to people's immune systems. The physically demanding aspect of their job is to make sure they are physically fit to lift all types of patients and with firefighters being able to carry all their gear and get the job done. With these stressful environments and having to exercise enough to make sure they can still do their job correctly can create an issue for first responders' mental and physical ability to maintain life and work balance. There has been many instances where first responders have either quit their jobs or have even gone as far as responders committing suicide. The problems that first responders are facing can cause problems in our society. Trying to figure out why and how to help out these first responders who are having a hard time with their mental state or are just physically drained to the point of not being able to work, puts society at risk of not getting that necessary first emergency service right away.

This proposal will research the issues that first responders are facing in regard to their mental health and what kinds of programs exist or need to be created to help first responders. People see first responders and do know that they deal with all types of situations that involve the public. However, not too many people understand the type of job that first responders really do, they just see them as people who are experts and can take care of any situation. In reality they are capable, but they are humans, meaning that they have feelings and emotions that can run high in very stressful situations, which can then lead to not being able to mentally cope with their thoughts about that certain call. For this proposal, the research questions that will be the aim of this paper

are: How does the structure of the United States healthcare system affect first responders' mental health? Does the stress of being a first responder correlate with mental health problems? Accordingly, this research investigates the issues of first responders' mental health and burnout due to their everyday stressful environments that they deal with and the types of programs or interventions that are being used or created to help out these responders who are in need of such actions. This research proposal will analyze the relationship between the stressful work environment of first responders and how their line of work has impacted their well-being. It will also explore the idea of having more programs that are supposed to help first responders with any kinds of issues they are facing, either mental or physical health. This study is relevant mostly to people who work as first responders or are thinking of becoming one to show that this is a real problem for this line of work, but with the right help it can be changed and can make this work system better for them and for the patients. This research is worth doing because if our frontline care workers are not mentally and physically capable of doing their job, the public will not be able to take care of emergency situations on their own when they need that specific type of help. It can be detrimental to the society with no first responders who are able to help and deal with all the different situations they get into because people who are not in that field are not trained to try and figure out what to do that can cause someone to potentially die.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When people call for help in an emergency, they are happy for the people that show up to help take care of whatever is needed. First responders are the frontline of medical, fire, or any weather emergency for the public. These people are trained and continue training to be able to handle all types of emergencies so that the people who live in that community know that there are professionals that will come and take care of what is needed. First responders have one of the most mentally exhausting and physically demanding jobs that requires only the best people to work these jobs because they are handling life or death situations. First responders are seen as the heroes of emergency services and there are a lot of mental and physical effects that come with the job. Dealing with stressful and critical situations takes a toll on people and when this occurs frequently, it can drain someone's well-being. This literature review focuses on the topic of first responders and the ways their mental health has been affected by their line of work with developing higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, etc. from dealing with all types of emergency situations. The main focus is to understand the problems that first responders experience and to try to find ways to migrate or help them. For this literature review, I will talk about the themes of studies showing the awareness of mental health of first responders and programs made to help first responders deal with their state of mind.

Awareness of Mental Health

Many studies have shown that first responders have symptoms of an emotional imbalance in their life and that their work is affecting them negatively. Being a first responder and dealing with stressful emergency situations go hand in hand due to their line of work and it can have a negative impact on someone's well-being. Analysis by Davies, and Cheung (2022) aims to provide information for social workers to protect their own mental health while caring for their clients and raise awareness about social workers' needs in frontline duties. They concluded five

challenges for first responder social workers: (1) COVID-19 impacts on resource constraints, (2) employment insecurity, (3) disenfranchised guilt, (4) physical distancing and caution fatigue, and (5) managing self-care. Even though this study found some evidence on the mental state of first responders and the challenges they face, we cannot strongly yet say that these challenges are the main problems for every first responder out there and that many responders have been working before COVID-19 and have had mental health problems before that started. Others like Nemecek (2018) highlight the importance of first responders who are at high risk of behavioral health issues as they frequently face violence, death, trauma, and societal struggles through studies being shown.

Many studies have focused on measuring empathy, traumatic stress, mental distress, aggression, world assumptions, and personality (Wagner, Pasca, & Regehr, 2019) and examining the four post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD symptom clusters: re-experiencing, avoidance, dysphoria, and hyperarousal, included in the Dysphoria factor model to depression, substance abuse, and general stress among firefighters in a large metropolitan city in the United States (Arbona & Schwartz, 2016.) For example, a qualitative study done by Stout and Kostamo (2021) with in depth interviews with firefighters on how they experience burnout or traumatic fatigue found two different themes. The first theme was contributors to stress and the two sub themes were traumatic incidents and a lack of sleep and fatigue from shift work and the second theme was stress mitigation, which consisted of three sub themes: giving and receiving mentoring; the healing benefits of dogs; and exercise, adrenaline, and work/life balance. Through these studies, there is supportive evidence that there are mental health problems related to first responders in their line of work and the burnout they feel from stressful emergency situations. Of course, this is only a couple smaller studies done and not representing the entire United States' first responders, but with each study the same theme of their work having an effect on their well-being is a huge problem because if they cannot perform properly, our emergency system will be destroyed. Further, paper will analyze the programs being created to help with the awareness of mental health problems for first responders.

Programs

With many studies looking at how mental health problems have been affecting first responders with their critical jobs, this paper will also show the programs that have been created that are supposed to help first responders with any kinds of issues they are facing either mental or physical. Addressing the problems first responders are facing in regard to mental health and feeling fatigued from their job has created a stressful life for them so having some programs set in place is what will help them. For example, Hillman (2022) illustrates how adding many programs and interventions for first responders will create a trauma informed environment for these responders to reduce their stress levels. The types of programs and interventions that have been implemented for first responders are growing rapidly, but not having the correct programs for responders with certain problems in their areas will not help them out and is just a waste of time. It is hard to have strong enough data to show that some programs work for responders, but there is enough evidence to say that many responders have depression (Harris, Baloglu, & Stacks (2002). In light of this, many places around the U.S. have devoted countless hours in finding the best type of programs that suit all the needs of dealing with significant stress factors,

mental health issues, depression, and many other related topics. Many studies have looked at exercises that will help first responders be able to handle long term exposure to critical incidents that they see on a regular basis (Chopko, Papazoglou, & Schwartz, 2018) and interventions have been identified in the general population to effectively reduce stigma that may be applicable to firefighters, such as psychoeducation, mental health literacy, and personal contact with consumers of mental health treatment revealed how digital storytelling is a resource to help with psychiatric symptom recognition and facilitate treatment (Johnson, Vega, Kohalmi, Roth, Howell, and Van Hasselt, 2020.) Also, others demonstrate how the government needs to take on more responsibility for better and more effective programs that help out first responders mental well-being (Hernandez, Arrell-Rosenquist, and Lewis, 2021.) Across these studies that talk about programs and interventions that have been created for the betterment of first responders, have helped think more about the issue of their line of work and how it affects their mental health and ability to do their job well.

With all the studies and sources that relate to my topic of first responders and how their jobs affect their mental health as well as their physical ability with the emergency situations they get put into every day, the key findings that are meant to be taken into consideration. This paper shows the awareness of these problems first responders are facing with different kinds of programs out there to give them the best help they need to stay mentally and physically healthy to continue working in this field. Most of the studies that are mentioned here are mostly recent so there is action going on, but future research could entail are these programs actually getting the results they want and if there are any areas for improvement. Having first responders being mentally stable and physically fit is very important for our society because if they are not present in our lives, it would create more difficulties that our world would not want to face.

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS

Research Design

The research study would be a mixture of original data collection and secondary source analysis. Having secondary sources will help this study make my analysis stronger because it will support my data and research questions. My research questions are: How does the structure of the United States healthcare system affect first responders' mental health? Does the stress of being a first responder correlate with mental health problems? The two main objectives that will be the focus of this study are: 1) Analyzing the relationship between the stressful work environment of first responders and how their line of work has impacted their well-being, and 2) To explore the idea of having more programs that are supposed to help first responders with any kinds of issues they are facing either mental or physical health. In order to address the research question stated above, a qualitative research design is used because doing in depth interviews and surveys that relate to the questions will help get the best data out of this topic and will give me clear examples from people who are actually in the emergency service field. Getting solid data from this type of research study is the best way to make out some conclusions about the research questions.

Methods

The sources of the data will be scholar journal articles that relate to this research study and the first responders that volunteer to be a part of this study. The participants are first responders, which can be firefighters, EMTs, or paramedics, in the bay area ranging from Santa Clara all the way up to San Francisco. The sample for this study will require 1,000 first responders from the bay area that have had some kind of struggle with either their physical and mental well-being as it relates to their line of work. For my data collection process, it will consist of interviews with first responders with multiple one on ones and group interviews to get more people involved to find stronger data. The questions being asked during the interview will be related to the first responders' experiences in the field, how they have been able to try and deal with stressful situations, how they are feeling about their job now, and many others that consist of questions relating to their well-being in their line of work. The study will also consist of a qualitative survey that other first responders can fill out instead of doing the interview if they wish not too. The qualitative survey will be based on open and descriptive questions to obtain in-depth answers. The thematic analysis for the qualitative data that I have found will consist of transcribing the interviews and creating open codes from the answers that I have gotten from the first responders using ATLAS.ti. Once I have finished writing all of my open codes I will look through all of them and see if there are any patterns that I noticed with the open codes and try to create focused codes so that I can have a better and more detailed understanding of the data that I have just collected from the interviews and how it is related to the research questions I am trying to figure out. With the focused codes, they will be the direct data I need to write down my findings and see if I have found out the answers to my questions and will have created a hypothesis on this topic. As for the survey, I will do a similar analysis as the interviews with finding codes within all the answers and seeing if there are any patterns that relate to my research questions.

Practical Considerations

With any study, there are always potential obstacles that could get in the way of getting all the data that one wants. With this study, an obstacle could be not getting permission from some of the districts and departments that deal with the organization of first responders so not having enough participants is always an issue. An ethical issue that could be a problem is this topic is very personal and the participants may not be comfortable with me asking questions relating to their personal life and answering them to me causing for not strong enough data to make a conclusion. These are serious problems, but there are ways to deal with them. With some departments not wanting to have their workers be interviewed, I will always tell them about the survey option, but with the entire whole bay area and just looking for 1,000 participants, I believe that there will be enough first responders that are eligible and are wanting to do the interviews. As for the ethical issue of the participants not feeling comfortable, I will do my very best to establish rapport and tell them they do not have to answer a question if they do not want to so that they know they are the ones in control of the interview, which will make them more comfortable with me and will usually correlate to having in depth conversations and solid data to come out of the interviews.

IMPLICATIONS & CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE

Practical Implications

This research proposal has a lot of importance for not just the first responder community, but the public as well. As stated earlier, first responders help out the people in need, but if they are not adequately able to do their job because their minds are not in the right space, this creates a problem for the people who need their help in very urgent situations. For the data that will have been collected the findings should show that there needs to be an improvement of programs or interventions that truly help first responders get the correct care that they need. There are programs that have been helping out many responders to cope with stressful emergencies that they have dealt with, such as “First Responders Health & Wellness” and “Peer Support Group” funded by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, but there also needs to be more emphasis on the long term damage that these responders are dealing with and that is where there needs to be improvement in the first responder programs and interventions.

Theoretical Implications

As stated in my literature review, the awareness of the mental health problems related to first responders is the theme that this proposal has been looking at. Programs are being created to help these first responders who are dealing with hardships in their life that affect their ability to function properly. My work that I have shown for this proposal will help challenge current assumptions about first responders and how people do not see the whole side of their work so they take advantage of their job for their own benefit, when people should be really thanking them more and having more people in power help start up more programs for first responders all across the United States. The status of first responders as shown before is that they are prepared for all types of emergency situations and they should be, but they are also human as well meaning they have emotions and sometimes those emotions can take over and destroy someone, so without the right guidance for them, their job or more importantly, their lives could be over. The work that I have done here is for everyone to understand the stressful environment first responders work in and to have the public be more aware about how their jobs have affected their ability to do the job properly and if it is not done properly, the possibility of people not getting the emergency service help they need will decline.

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