

Prevention and Reduction of Vicarious Trauma in the Youth Legal System: A Rapid Evidence Review

Purpose

The purpose of this review is to identify the most effective and theory-driven strategies for preventing and reducing vicarious traumatization experienced by individuals working in the youth legal system with the ultimate goal of improving youth outcomes.

Approach

We used a five-phase rapid evidence review process to assess the relevant research literature. The sources for the review included PubMed, Academic Search Complete, and Google Scholar. The initial searches yielded 1,690 articles. After title and abstract review, 35 articles were retained. Twelve duplicates were then removed with a total of 23 unique records found in the initial searches. Following in-depth screening, we retained 17 articles for use in this full synthesis. To be included, articles had to focus on strategies to reduce or prevent vicarious trauma, burnout, secondary traumatic stress, or related subjects. Articles could be empirical reviews, conceptual reviews, individual studies, theory-based, or opinion papers. These full-text articles and a list of other useful resources are included at the end of this report.

Findings

The search identified six individual articles (no systematic reviews or meta-analyses) on vicarious trauma or related subjects specific to the youth legal system. Four systematic reviews, two scoping reviews, and five conceptual reviews in closely allied literature (e.g., adult criminal legal system, child welfare, youth residential settings) were included as well. This is an emerging area of research with a number of promising practices.

Vicarious trauma can be debilitating for professionals working with traumatized populations (Kim et al., 2022; Pierlli et al., 2020). Not only does vicarious trauma negatively impact workers, but it also decreases quality of care for the individuals they serve (Ko & Memon, 2020; Stewart & Terry, 2014). Fortunately, research suggests addressing worker wellbeing can indirectly improve youth outcomes (Santos et al., 2023). The current literature on interventions to prevent and decrease vicarious trauma are reviewed.

Stewart and Terry (2014) conducted a rigorous systematic review of interventions to decrease burnout and increase wellbeing among workers in secure settings such as prisons and mental health units. They used formal methods to appraise article strength and validity. This review recommended investing in staff development through increased training and high-quality clinical supervision. Of note, Stewart and Terry (2014) found that some healthcare assistants experienced more distress after increased training. Ko and Memon (2022) also completed a formal systematic review of secondary trauma among professionals in the criminal justice field. Recommendations included improving working conditions, increasing organizational and social support, and mindfulness practices as helpful interventions. They also identified incorporation of resilience into trauma-informed care as a promising practice. Alternately to Stewart and Terry (2014), Ko and Memon (2022) reported little is known about the effectiveness of psychoeducation-based training. Santos and colleagues (2023) evaluated programs serving care workers in youth residential facilities through a systematic review process that included article quality assessment. They also identified mindfulness-based interventions and programs targeting workers' emotional and mental wellbeing as potentially promising practices. Santos and colleagues

(2023) noted that most trainings aimed to increase skills but concluded that simply improving skills without targeting wellbeing is likely insufficient. Additionally, Turley and colleagues (2022) conducted a systematic review on wellbeing among social workers that concluded organization-level interventions, specifically increased supervision and mentorship, offer the most promising results. Similarly, Olaniyan and colleagues (2020) conducted a scoping review that determined workplace culture of support, including peer support and support from leadership, appears to significantly reduce levels of stress and burnout, and increase retention among child welfare workers. This review also emphasizes the importance of management attending to issues such as workload, harassment, and organizational justice.

Kim and colleagues (2022) completed a scoping review on interventions for service providers working with traumatized patients. Authors concluded that four categories of interventions (i.e., psychoeducation, mindfulness, art and recreation, alternative medicine) show promising reductions in vicarious trauma symptoms as well as other associated outcomes such as self-efficacy, mindfulness, and job satisfaction. Importantly, long-term, group-based peer support and comprehensive programmatic approaches appear to be the most effective options to decrease or prevent vicarious trauma. Kim and colleagues (2022) provided several specific recommendations for program development: 1) interventions must address specific outcomes of vicarious trauma; 2) programs must be designated as either preventative or ameliorative and have specific targets and goals; 3) primary organizational prevention must be in place to lower the risk of vicarious trauma; 4) funding sources and policymakers must provide adequate support for development and evaluation of such programs.

Pirelli and colleagues (2020) conducted a conceptual review on vicarious trauma within forensic psychology that recommended identifying risk factors in the workplace and the individual, as well as strengthening individual protective factors. This review highlighted the importance of workers being supported in accessing individual therapy when needed. Leoni and colleagues' (2020) review on interventions to decrease stress among people working with patients with neurodevelopmental disorders recommended CBT, ACT, and mindfulness as effective when individual therapy is warranted. Leoni and colleagues (2020) further recommended clarification of roles, responsibilities, and schedules; training that includes modeling and feedback; and increased support post-training. James (2020) also completed a non-systematic literature review with an eye towards interventions for lawyers. James (2020) recommended trauma-informed care broadly [marked by "safety, trust, collaboration, choice and empowerment" (p. 285)], self-care, and trauma-informed supervision practices (e.g., normalization of responses to trauma, validation).

Sprang and colleagues (2019) completed a review that included notes from a scientific meeting of experts on secondary traumatic stress. Authors ultimately recommended a two-tiered approach to prevent and treat secondary traumatic stress. First, on an organizational-level, prevention techniques are recommended to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors. Second, selective prevention or clinical treatment should be provided for individuals who are experiencing higher levels of impairment due to secondary traumatic stress. Risk and protective factors associated with secondary traumatic stress could be targeted in treatment. Current interventions address general health and wellness, safety, morale, and self-care. Bowman (2022) completed a brief conceptual review on child welfare worker wellbeing and proposed a wellness model based on this review that includes funding for health and wellness programming. Specifically, Bowman (2022) recommended increased education and training for supervisors and leadership, ongoing evaluation of staff wellness and

supervisor effectiveness, smaller caseloads, more time spent in supervision, on site health programs, incentives for engagement in wellness programs, and development of a wellness committee.

Individual articles on the youth legal system also recommended a variety of intervention and prevention techniques. Bademci and colleagues (2016) conducted an outcome study on a psychosocial support group. They concluded that individuals in the psychosocial support group had lower levels of burnout, anxiety, depression, exhaustion, and higher job satisfaction and personal accomplishment after completion of the program as compared to before the program. Reyes-Quilodran and colleagues (2022) measured stress and burnout among social workers in the youth legal system. Social workers made the following recommendations to decrease secondary traumatic stress: increased compensation, decreased caseloads, increased flexibility in scheduling, more opportunities for professional training, and increased coworker support systems, including teambuilding activities. Sichel and colleagues (2019) recommended trauma informed programs focus on safety and positive relationship building (both within the juvenile system and the community) rather than punishment. The authors theorized that these positive relationships would improve youth outcomes and decrease recidivism. They also indicated that increasing staff support through training, increased decision-making power, focus on internal recruitment/retention and increased opportunities for promotion increases worker wellbeing, and thus their ability to develop healthy relationships.

Rhineberger-Dunn and Mack (2020) identified predictors of secondary trauma in the youth legal system and provided recommendations to decrease trauma among staff: increased decision-making opportunities, increased safety measures, debriefing/counseling after major incidents, increased coworker support. Individuals who experienced more coworker support had less secondary trauma. Thus, training on and time for this kind of support is critical. Sheppard and colleagues (2022) found that trauma-informed care models can decrease turnover and burnout by increasing physical and emotional safety of employees. They noted that perception of safety is also important, and this perception can be increased by utilizing risk assessments, formal behavior management systems, and appropriate staff to youth ratios. Svetaz and colleagues (2018) highlighted that racism significantly contributes to experiences of vicarious trauma; thus, commitment to equity, inclusion, and diversity as well as anti-racist views must be explicitly stated and reflected in organizational processes and policies. These authors further recommended development of interventions to address chronic minority stress and vicarious trauma, and trainings for providers to sufficiently address racism within treatment and evaluation.

Numerous reviews noted the lack of high-quality studies available on vicarious trauma intervention and prevention, thus limiting the overall generalizability of findings and reducing brevity of recommendations (Kim et al., 2022; Ko & Memon, 2022; Pirelli et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2023; Sprang et al., 2019; Stewart & Terry, 2014; Turley et al., 2022). These recommendations are in the category of promising practices; additional research must be completed to determine best practices.

Summary

A variety of interventions at both the individual and organizational level are likely to improve staff wellbeing. Implementation of promising practices to decrease or prevent vicarious trauma among workers is likely to improve both short- and long-term outcomes for legally-involved youth (Ko & Memon, 2020; Santos et al., 2023; Stewart & Terry, 2014).

Useful Resources

Self-paced courses on secondary trauma: <https://training.caltrin.org/page/self-paced-courses>

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)* secondary traumatic stress training: <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/media/video/30416>

Models for Change Guidelines on Trauma-Informed Care** (pp. 45-50 on vicarious trauma): <https://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/846/>

* OJJDP has historically held webinar series on this topic. Contact the help desk at OJJDPPTA@usdoj.gov or 1-833-647-0513 for information on upcoming trainings.

** This, as with other guides, reflects consensus among the individuals and organizations involved in the development of the guidelines and often cites supporting research; however, it is not always clear in these guidelines when a recommendation is specifically research-informed, made on the basis of an ethics or values framework, or comes from a different authority. Consequently, while valuable, these guidelines should be understood as reflecting a combination of values, research, and opinion.

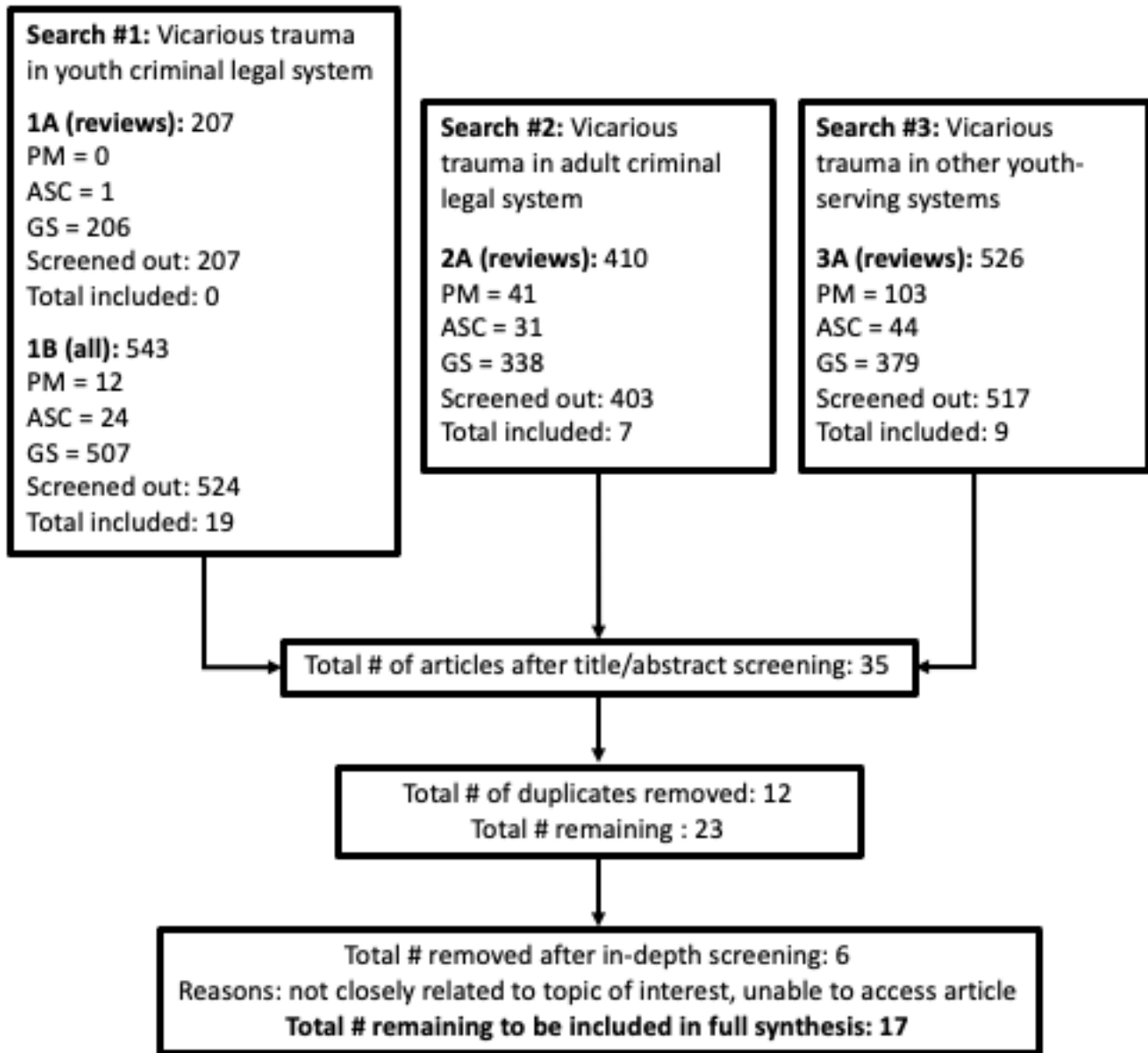
Methods

Topic(s) of Interest
Primary: Vicarious trauma among staff in the youth criminal legal system
Secondary: Vicarious trauma among staff in the adult criminal legal system
Secondary: Vicarious trauma among staff in other youth-serving systems

Exclusion/Inclusion Criteria
Exclude articles specific to jury duty
Exclude articles specific to sex offenses
Exclude articles specific to COVID-19
Exclude books, book chapters, and dissertations/theses
Include only articles in last 10 years

Search Terms: PubMed + Academic Search Complete (Google Scholar did not include Boolean operators)	
Search #1: Initial terms developed by lead with help from experts.	("juvenile" OR "youth") AND ("court" OR "detention" OR "legal" OR "corrections" OR "probation" OR "justice") AND ("secondary trauma" OR "vicarious trauma" OR "burnout")
Search #2: Broadened initial search (#1) to include adult criminal legal system. Took out ("juvenile" OR "youth"), added "criminal" OR "parole." Meta-analysis or review-level articles only.	("court" OR "detention" OR "legal" OR "corrections" OR "probation" OR "justice" OR "criminal") AND ("secondary trauma" OR "vicarious trauma" OR "burnout") AND ("review" OR "meta-analysis" OR "meta")
Search #3: Broadened initial search (#1). Took out ("court" OR "detention" OR "legal" OR "corrections" OR "probation" OR "justice"). Added "child" OR "adolescent." Added ("welfare" OR "crisis worker" OR "mental health" OR "foster care" OR "social work" OR "health"). Meta-analysis or review-level articles only.	("juvenile" OR "youth" OR "child" OR "adolescent") AND ("welfare" OR "crisis worker" OR "mental health" OR "foster care" OR "social work" OR "health") AND ("secondary trauma" OR "vicarious trauma" OR "burnout") AND ("review" OR "meta-analysis" OR "meta")

PRISMA Diagram



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