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Police officers’ perceptions of the challenges involved in Internet Child Exploitation investigation

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Abstract:

Purpose

– The purpose of this paper is to explore police officers’ perceptions of the challenges and work stressors of working in Internet Child Exploitation (ICE) investigation.

Design/methodology/approach

– Participants were a heterogeneous sample of 32 ICE investigators across nine Australian jurisdictions. Officers’ perceptions of ICE work were elicited via individual, open-ended, anonymous, telephone interviews, which focused on both the nature and impact of work-related stressors and challenges.

Findings

– Thematic analysis revealed that viewing ICE material was not perceived to be a major stressor or particularly traumatic facet of ICE investigation. Rather, the challenges related to three areas; work relationships, workload and resources and the physical environment. Participants also suggested some improvements to their work environment which could reduce the impact of these challenges.
Practical implications

– The stressors identified by ICE investigators in this study place physical, psychological and social restrictions on investigative capacity. Modifications to the workplace environment that facilitate more effective professional collaboration, reduce workload and enhance investigator efficiency and functionality of the physical work environment would likely reduce the potential for harm associated with ICE investigation and improve ICE investigators’ capacity to perform their role.

Originality/value

– This is the first study to use a broad research framework to examine the full range of stressors that ICE investigators face (both organisational and operational). The findings are important for developing comprehensive theories regarding workplace traumatisation as well as holistic intervention models to assist the prevention and management of stress related to ICE investigation.

Article

A total of 12 years ago, it was estimated that more than one million child exploitation images existed on the internet (Jenkins, 2001). Two years ago, an offender was apprehended with a personal collection of nearly one million child exploitation images (Hawken, 2011) – indicating how the problem is growing. Combating Internet Child Exploitation (ICE) requires specialist law-enforcement investigators to routinely view thousands of sexually graphic (often violent) images involving children (Wortley and Smallbone, 2012), which raises concerns about possible harmful occupational health effects on investigators (Krause, 2009). A process of vicarious traumatisation has been implicated in the development of psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety and secondary-traumatic stress disorder (STSD) amongst occupational groups working with maltreated children (Sabin-Farrell and Turpin, 2003; Salston and Figley, 2003). Repeated exposure to traumatic events can have cumulative chronic effects (Webster, 2013) and exposure to ICE material poses unique risks (Krause, 2009).

Exposure to ICE material may not only harm individual investigators but can lessen the capacity of police to prevent ICE production and distribution. Developing prevention models to guide the selection, management, monitoring and reintegration of ICE investigators requires research examining the occupational health impacts of ICE investigation, and the role the work environment and investigators’ practices have in moderating these impacts.

To date, we could locate only three studies that have explored the personal impact of ICE investigation. Burns et al. (2008) conducted face-to-face interviews with 14 ICE investigators to examine the activities, experiences and circumstances the officers found to help or hinder coping with this work. The Critical Incident Technique was used whereby participants were asked to recall a specific event that helped or made it harder to cope with their work. When describing their mental state during incidents of exposure to ICE material, participants identified a number of negative
outcomes, including physical and emotional reactions (e.g. headaches, mood-swings); intrusive thoughts about ICE material; feeling socially isolated and becoming fearful for and overprotective of children.

The other two ICE studies adopted survey designs. Wolak and Mitchell (2009) collated results from an online survey of 511 organisations whose staff had been exposed to ICE material in an investigative capacity. They examined the extent of exposure to ICE material, problems experienced by investigators, the ICE investigator selection process and support available for those viewing material. Although the majority of participants indicated that they had observed no problems amongst ICE investigators, some reported investigators experiencing personal and marital problems, work-related problems in regards to dealing with the material and a variety of adverse reactions. In the third study, Perez et al. (2010) used psychometric tests and open-ended questions to measure levels of burnout and STSD among 28 federal law enforcement agency investigators regularly exposed to child exploitation media. They found that, although scoring highly on professional efficacy, a number of staff experienced elevated levels of STSD, emotional exhaustion and cynicism.

Collectively, these prior studies on investigators’ exposure to ICE material indicate ICE work can have a deleterious effect on investigator well-being. It needs to be considered, however, that ICE investigation occurs within a complex work environment and exposure to ICE material may not be the only or major stressor investigators face. All police work is potentially challenging and stressful. General work stressors could partially explain negative symptoms indicative of stress and burnout in ICE investigators (Hart and Cotton, 2002). Indeed, ICE investigators have reported several organisational stressors. Investigators in Wolak and Mitchell's (2009) study complained of being insufficiently supported and respected within their agencies. Investigators in Perez et al.’s (2010) study identified excessive workload and poor treatment by management as stressors. Further, general child abuse investigators (required to elicit statements from children about alleged sexual and physical abuse) have identified organisational stressors such as high workload and tensions arising from professional collaboration as more stressful than case content (Wright et al., 2006). A broad research framework, examining the full range of stressors ICE investigators face (both organisational and operational) is therefore important for developing comprehensive theories regarding workplace traumatisation as well as holistic intervention models to assist the prevention and management of ICE-related stress.

The current study addresses the need for a broad research framework by providing a group of experienced ICE investigators the opportunity to define for themselves the nature and full range of sources of work stress. The sample was heterogeneous, including unsworn computer analysts, investigators and team supervisors from all nine Australian jurisdictions. Interviews were anonymous, open-ended and focused on eliciting a broad understanding of the officers' work situations (both positive and negative) and the stressors or challenges (if any) the officers perceived to be negative, as well as their impact.
Method

Participants

Participants (n=32) were recruited from nine Australian jurisdictions with the assistance of ICE managerial staff who invited them to take part in our anonymous telephone interview at a time of their choosing. Participants were assured of anonymity, being identified only by numerical code. Demographic details collected during interviews confirmed sample heterogeneity. The sample consisted of ten females and 22 males. Two participants were unsworn employees. Four participants had left ICE investigation with 28 still currently involved in ICE investigation. Employment tenure with a police organisation ranged from 4 to 34 years (M=15.60 years). ICE investigation tenure ranged between 1 and 25 years (M=5.02 years). The sample included three computer analysts, 23 detectives, sworn police of various ranks, four ICE supervisors and two trainers.

Procedure

Interviews ranged in duration from 28 to 132 minutes (M=58, SD=17 minutes), all conducted over the telephone by research academics in our team. A two-phased semi-structured interview schedule was used. Initially participants were invited to talk about their current role (in policing) and how they became involved in ICE investigation. Former ICE investigators were asked their reasons for leaving. The second phase focused on the officers’ work situation. A standard prompt was used, “Please elaborate specifically on the nature of your current/previous role in terms of how you spend/spent your time”. Follow-up prompts used detail provided by officers as cues to elicit further elaboration about behaviours, perceptions, workplace structures, experiences and organisational support. When stressors or challenges were reported, participants were encouraged to elaborate on how work arrangements (if at all) affected their ability to perform ICE investigation. Importantly, the interviewer did not presume that participants faced challenges from any particular facet of their work or that ICE investigation negatively impacted psychological well-being. The interviewer was a largely passive participant, asking only broad, open-ended questions to encourage elaboration and seek clarification.

Data management and analysis

All interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim and double-checked for accuracy. The analytical techniques employed were inductive and based on the principles of thematic analysis, which involves identifying themes, categories and interrelationships in the text to aid description and interpretation of participants’ experiences (Browne, 2004). Extrapolating key themes within the data set began with two researchers independently reading all interview transcripts and making elaborate notes about the challenges identified. These researchers then met to identify common themes. A coding manual was developed. All of the participants’ comments were subsequently re-read, coded and tabulated. The table included the nature and sources of any stressors, and a list of specific concerns and situational or contextual factors relating to each stressor (including the impact on job performance). Quotations are provided to support the results; grammatical changes were
made to these quotations where appropriate to improve flow and clarity. Detail that could potentially identify individual participants was removed.

Results

All police members talked openly about their workplace experiences in a factual manner. Their approach and interview content portrayed (on the whole) a very task-oriented group of people who were confident in their abilities. Participant background varied considerably and for many, the offence type was not the motivator. Some had been “headhunted” for their computer-analytic skills and investigation experience, and some took this job for reasons of convenience or to gain varied experience.

The interviews highlighted that there are many challenges and stressors associated with ICE investigation. Interestingly, viewing material was not singled out as a workplace stressor or especially traumatic facet of the work environment. While the officers acknowledged the role was not suitable for everyone, none appeared openly distressed or expressed current difficulties associated with viewing material[1]. The officers perceived viewing ICE material as an integral work task, with other workplace stressors impeding their work capacity. Participant responses held little indication of personal grievances or an entrenched anti-organisational position. Rather, they reflected concern that these factors impeded their job performance. The challenges were addressed under three broad themes: work relationships, workload and resources, and the physical environment. Issues related to each of these themes are now discussed in turn.

Work relationships

Interpersonal relationships represented the primary workplace challenge. The majority of interviews focused on this issue. It was raised early in the interview without prompting. Although cases were assigned to individuals and pursued independently, teamwork was reported to be integral to an officer’s ability to cope with various stressors. Specifically, the team supported individuals by providing informal debriefing, sharing workload, peer monitoring (informal social support) and sharing of expertise and technical skills. Further, relationships with immediate peers boosted investigators’ morale by providing a chance to communicate with others who shared and understood their work experiences. Low group cohesion or intra-group dissention impeded work performance and stress levels increased significantly:

Having a close team makes it easier to deal with the sorts of issues that you need to deal with. It just gives you people that are going through the same sorts of things; people you can associate with and that helps.
A lot of it comes down to team dynamics. I suppose that’s true with any organisation – no matter what the task is it comes down to the individuals and how they interact with each other. At the moment it’s quite good; everybody’s got a positive attitude to the work and that really helps in terms of the issues we face. But there have been times when it’s not been ideal. That’s due to a myriad of reasons; different personalities, different agendas of people, et cetera.

Team leaders’ personality and competence was perceived as particularly important. In addition to being an important source of social support (as with other co-workers), team leaders play an additional role by dictating work structure. Misunderstandings regarding the nature of the work, the realities of how long it takes to complete jobs and team needs can introduce tension. The optimal team leader was described as an integral team member. They care about investigators, value the work, understand technical and emotional job demands (enabling appropriate work allocation), are approachable and proactive in providing an administrative structure that assists job performance (without micromanagement), are willing to access additional staff and provide resources (e.g. employer assistance programme) addressing team needs. Effective communication, confidentiality in relation to personal issues, allowing flexibility in the work environment, reasonable workload allocation and providing feedback about case outcomes were deemed to be important behavioural attributes:

It’s mentally draining for me to work where I work and then have to constantly justify my actions to bosses who don’t understand what I do. That leads to a lot of angst. Having to constantly go and explain everything drains you. The organisation’s ability to comprehend the amount of work I do has more impact than the fact I am looking at child exploitation material.

My team leader’s personality is fantastic. In saying that, he’s not touchy-feely – it’s not a requirement to be an emotionally sensitive person. But he is very observant, very honest with people, provides both positive and negative feedback, and he doesn’t give people any false impressions of their ability to do the job. His ability to do that assists the emotional climate within the unit.

My detective sergeant [supervisor] is very, very switched on and is generally across everyone’s workload. That’s what it comes down to – how quick your sergeant is aware of what his troops’ workload is. We’ve got investigation spread sheets that are regularly updated, showing where everyone is at. But occasionally we get enquiries from other areas which are not in the spread sheet but require time – assisting interstate police, particularly with extraterritorial warrants, showing interstate police exhibits. There is lots of red tape to get through which can tie people up for hours and days. So if the sergeant’s not paying attention to what’s going on, then you can be working feverishly trying to get enquiries for interstate police done and he’s allocating investigations to you and you’ll say ‘hang on I can’t do this’ and then it will turn into an argument and heated situation.
Several participants described team leaders who appeared unconcerned with any issue apart from budget and their own standing within the organisational hierarchy. These team leaders were reported to be “too damaged by police culture” to be effective supervisors. A commonly expressed opinion was that ICE teams would benefit from supervisors undertaking some case work, as this reduces supervisors’ ambivalence by providing insight into the technical and emotional job demands and enhances investigator-supervisor connectedness:

There’d be days where everything is going really smoothly and everybody is getting along. But there’d be other days where it’s an absolute collision course, where people are just going at each other for no apparent reason because of the stress we’re put under by management. There are so many steps to getting one of those jobs ready to go. You’re viewing images while juggling other tasks, running at this really high mileage all the time and all [management] keep saying is ‘right, when are we going to do that job? Get that job ready. Is that job ready? They’ve got no idea that we’re moving as fast as we possibly can.

High staff turnover was perceived to hamper the ability to form strong and effective workplace relationships. This is because the ability to offer support and to be proactive in identifying other team members’ needs depends on trust and a good understanding of the way in which others normally related, coped with and displayed stress. Such relationships take time to develop. Frequently replacing team leaders alters work structures and team dynamics, creating a major burden for staff while removing an important avenue of support:

A lot will come down to the stability of the people who run the crew. As a person who’s been in the unit for a long time, I wouldn’t go to the sergeant who has just taken over my crew and say I’ve got a problem because I don’t know what reaction I’ll get when I speak to him. The modern police force, certainly in criminal investigations, disadvantages you if you want to stay in the one spot too long. That’s why you get a massive turnover of people and as a result less trust in the people you work with.

Finally, relationships with professionals external to ICE units constitute a potential source of stress. Given that distribution of ICE material crosses jurisdictional boundaries, investigation requires cooperation, expertise and support of professionals from other jurisdictions with the authority to arrest offenders, intercept or prevent on-going distribution, and access potentially important evidence. Collaborative stressors were time delays in responses or actions, misunderstandings and conflicts arising from different laws, priorities and procedures and ambiguous guidelines:

The Internet is a global situation so we don’t always have jurisdiction of the websites that we come across. If a website is hosted in Russia then we have to go via Interpol to Russia to try and get it taken down. It’s a slow process and unfortunately it’s not always possible to eradicate material.
I deal with a lot of international referrals, like in the last month I’ve sent about 15 convictions internationally. It might be only after you’ve chatted to a sex offender for a while online that you realise – hello – this person is actually in Italy or the US. You can’t just write the matter off because often there are children at risk. So we then have to do up an investigation package and forward it internationally. These packages take up a lot of your time and are quite challenging.

ICE investigation also involves interaction with prosecutors and the judicial system. For example, as part of the trial process, ICE investigators must be present (if requested) while legal professionals view the ICE material. Further, legal professionals dictate time schedules and work volume, specifying the number of images needing to be classified and the format necessary for presentation in court. Collaboration generates conflict because it requires subordination and acceptance of demands perceived to be unreasonable. Further, conflict arises when cases are not prosecuted and sentencing does not (in ICE investigators’ minds) reflect the quality of evidence or energy expended on the case.

When I think back to the worst case I’ve experienced, there was no adverse reaction to it other than the fact that there was an extremely lenient sentence at the end of it. This affected me more than anything else. I was so annoyed and disappointed that it took us longer to do the job than the person actually got as a sentence. The job was so big it took over 6 months and set a precedent for our jurisdiction in terms of the quantity of images and the extreme lengths that were taken to get and distribute the material and become part of online groups and networks. It was phenomenal the amount of work that these people [offenders] had done and the amount of work we did tracking them down. To get such a lenient sentence was just horrendous. That affected me more than anything else.

When you put all the efforts into presenting an air-tight case before a prosecuting authority and then at the end of it the accused gets a $50 fine it’s really disheartening.

Workload and resources

ICE investigation is a complex process requiring integration of many separate tasks performed by people with different skill sets. ICE investigation involves (at least in part) accessing, preserving, collating and presenting evidence in a form meeting legal requirements (including categorising images), proactive covert engagement with offenders online, giving evidence in court, liaising with victims and addressing queries and concerns from the public, executing search warrants, special operations and making arrests, writing reports and attending viewings and trials. When material is initially identified, the investigative response must be swift while complying with legal standards. Workload was brought up spontaneously by every participant (usually in a negative context). Issues related to work volume and insufficient time and resources. Long work hours were seen as necessary and a consistent source of strain:
The time restraints, compounded with the amount of different jobs and investigations that are running at any one time, makes the job difficult. You might be looking at child exploitation material in the morning for three hours and because of the workload you can’t then go and take a couple of hours to just be by yourself, have a coffee somewhere and make sure you’re feeling happy. You have to go straight to a crime scene or to interview a young kid who’s been sexually abused. It’s the time restraint and workload that causes the stress.

Participants identified three factors that had increased, or could potentially increase efficiency, reduce individual workload, and enhance officers’ perception of organisational support. First mentioned was computer technology. Participants referred to the importance of having up-to-date computer hardware for backing up large volumes of material and keeping up with the speed and ease of ICE material distribution and access. Further, officers referred to software which automatically scans an image library identifying previously graded material, thereby reducing double handling of evidence (i.e. the need to repeatedly view and grade material). All officers were aware of the software, but few had access to it:

Basically you push all your images into the database and it’ll spit you out a report that says ‘1000 of the 3000 images that you provided have already been identified as child pornography and this is the category of the child pornography’. Then we can just hand that report straight to the prosecutor and say ‘this clown’s got 1000 known child porn images that are classified as blah’ and we don’t even have to look at them. All we have to do is plug computers in and it basically does it for us. Eventually down the track 85% of all child porn images floating around on the internet will be classified and we won’t end up having to look at too many.

We’ve done jobs where the bad guys are using more computers than we have – jobs where we’ve taken 35 terabytes of storage away. We don’t have 35 terabytes in our server! I mean we just can’t back that up. We’ve stopped backing up a tape because it’s too expensive – $50 to back up 800 gig and you’re putting through 30 or 40 terabytes a month. They [management] just stopped buying the tapes.

The second workload-related factor was staffing adequacy. All except two participants felt staff numbers were inadequate for meeting the workload at any given time. This was attributed to inadequate recruitment of ICE staff, incompetency of some staff (due to insufficient training or experience), frequent secondment of ICE staff temporarily to other policing duties and some staff actively avoiding certain aspects of the job (e.g. not wanting to categorise certain types of traumatic case material). Thus, participants reported that increasing staff would not reduce workload and stress unless recruits had appropriate knowledge, skills and abilities. Incompetency creates more work for others who must correct errors while constantly supervising and training colleagues:

Recruiting people straight out of university who don’t have forensic experience does not solve the staffing problem. No matter how geek they are, they need experience. It could take 18 months for
them to get their head around how you do a forensic examination. I spend half my day training these people!

Limitations in completing image grading work were due to the nature of the task and competency. However, when it came to more objective procedures and skills, formal training deficits were very much entwined with workload. Most said they were expected to learn on the job without formal instruction. When formal training was available it was often restricted to one investigator, who was subsequently expected to take on extra duties training colleagues or absorbing specialised duties utilising the newly learned skills. The ad hoc and informal in-house nature of training was considered intrinsically inappropriate while denying other members of the team formal qualifications:

There’s definitely a big hole in training in relation to investigating and analysing, and managing exposure to, child exploitation material. When I did my first investigation I had to just work out myself how best to do it and I make mistakes because there weren’t clear policies or procedures. Inadequate training caused me to be exposed to the material more than I needed to be as I found myself revisiting material to fix up mistakes that I had made.

Trying to keep all the team up to speed and do individual training sessions would be almost impossible. On the most recent course, we just sent the analyst. He’s the one who is accessing most of the material on the websites. He can either train up the other members or if they had a specific task requiring the expertise, they can just give it to him and he’ll handle it.

The third workload-related factor was the perceived inappropriateness of certain job requests. Examples included ICE team members having to carry out unrelated policing duties (e.g. security work at a festival), investigators performing ICE-related administrative duties delegable to less-specialised staff, and investigators viewing and categorising every individual item of material when (from the investigators’ perspective) a representative sample of categorised images would suffice:

We need to be able to say to the court ‘Here’s a fibre optic. Connect to our server. We’re not going to give you a printed piece of paper’. This is the problem the court is having at the moment. They want things printed off and are not understanding when I say to them, ‘The reason I’ve given it to you on a DVD is that there is 2.4 million pages and if you print it you will kill trees, so here it is on DVD.

One of the things that makes the cases so weighty for us is that the courts want us do a complete examination. Rather than compile evidence for a representative proportion, they want us to go through every single image and give it a grading or a categorisation. Further, for each child exploitation image we need to say, ‘it came from this website, it was downloaded on this date, it was accessed by the bad guy on this day and it was still sitting in this folder over here when the detectives turned up’. You just can’t do that with every image. We’ve got a guy in our office at the moment going through 500,000 images.
The absence of clear policies and guidelines around the preparation of evidence leads to a lot of arguments and to-ing and fro-ing between our management and the prosecutors about how things should be done. Sometimes that causes us to have to do things a number of times.

Collectively, inadequate funding allocated to ICE investigation, the seemingly unnecessary nature of some of the tasks and modest salaries (relative to what these professionals could earn in private industry) resulted in officers feeling their skills were under-valued by management. Resourcing was directly linked to worker morale:

There are other areas within my organisation that are funded and promoted far more seriously than we are because it's the flavour of the month, political bickies – drugs and organised crime. When you talk about the dissemination of child exploitation material that's as organised as any drug cartel anywhere in the world [...] but it's just not looked upon the same way.

People aren’t happy about the pay. We’re a highly specialist IT unit but we’re getting paid less than generic IT people within our organisation. Yeah there is a slight difference between the police and the civilian wages because they have to work shifts whereas the civilians don’t work shifts, and there are different pay levels between sworn and unsworn, but within our own organisation, the forensic accountants start on about $20,000 more than what we start on. So that creates a bit of tension in terms of people’s happiness working in the organisation but the actual work itself doesn’t deter people.

The stress arising from limited resources was compounded by the knowledge that the offences investigated and prosecuted are just the “tip of the iceberg”:

I just do the best that I can with my two hands in my job. Given our limited resources I can’t think too much about what we need to combat on a global scale. With my six blokes we’re lucky to arrest 30 per year but there’s probably 3,000 operating on a daily basis. If you were to think bigger picture, you wouldn’t be able to cope because we’re not winning this battle.

Physical environment

Most participants reported their physical work environment was not ideal for ICE investigation. A common concern was the unsuitability of completely open-plan workspaces. Open-plan workspace was viewed, in part, as advantageous because it facilitated the debriefing and staff interaction necessary to prevent a potentially debilitating sense of isolation. However, some tasks were seen as requiring privacy. For example, material was sometimes so abhorrent that it was inappropriate to expose staff members who were not directly involved in the case. Sometimes the need arose to
telephone suspects in a covert investigation (e.g. pretending to be a victim) requiring an absence of background noise and distraction. Sometimes individual staff needed an impromptu confidential conversation with the supervisor. An easily accessible, soundproof, restricted access, dual-purpose viewing-meeting room was the suggested solution:

There’s a Catch-22 dilemma when you’re examining child exploitation images. On the one hand you want to limit exposure [of images] to as few people as possible. On the other hand, if a person sits for long hours in isolation, that’s quite detrimental to the longevity of that person’s ability to do this job in a healthy manner. You need to be able to re-engage at any time with your colleagues. Being able to look up from the computer and see people around is beneficial in this environment.

To conduct online investigations properly, in the perfect world, you’d have 20 computers all set up in this lovely room where the computers are back to back and everyone’s within sharing distance of each other, but you also have separate rooms where you can quickly run off with a mobile phone to talk to a particular person. I can tell you that all these people [offenders] want to make over-the-phone contact as soon as possible. Once they’ve initiated some sort of rapport with what they think is a child, they always want to speak to the child, so you have to have people who can purport to be a child on a phone fairly rapidly and sincerely and not give the game away so to speak. You need soundproof rooms because if you’re supposed to be in a bedroom, you can’t have a copper’s gurgling, coughing, telling jokes in the background. You have to have a private soundproof room.

Another benefit of having a separate meeting room is it would allow forensic analysts and other ICE-related staff (not located in the same unit as the investigators) to examine material in a secure, distraction-free environment. Currently, dedicated space with adequate facilities for meeting professionals from different units was lacking:

When it comes to viewing material, it always has to happen at the electronic crime area, so we leave our office and go to their office because obviously they have to set the computers up in a secure way and then remove all of the data from it so we can view it. So they’d say ‘oh so and so isn’t here just now, so you can sit there’. And you’d be sitting at someone else’s workstation, viewing the images then when that person’s shift starts you have to move and set everything up at a different desk and then that person would come in and you have to move all over again.

A final issue related to the physical work environment was discomfort. Common concerns included poor ventilation and excessive ambient heat emanating from the computers, cramped and overcrowded workspaces, no natural light and furniture unsuitable for long hours of sitting. Officers reported these work conditions reduced productivity and presented significant occupational health and safety risks:
The worst thing about [doing ICE work] is we don’t have any windows or doors, no light. It’s like the bat caves! They’ve tucked us away in this big building and unfortunately we’re sort of in the middle of the building and honestly you wouldn’t know if it’s rain or sunshine or night or day outside. I think when you’re dealing with this sort of material and your job is to sit in front of a computer and engage these people it would be nice to have a window where you could just look outside and see people walking across the street or whatever rather than just be trapped in this sort of dungeon-type environment.

We get all the work done and we do what we have to with what we’ve got. But a better work environment would bring immediate benefits, there’s no doubt about it. No one seems to take it very seriously.

Discussion

The in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with this heterogeneous group of 32 Australian investigators provided a broad overview of the experience of working in the ICE area. While police investigators choose to work in ICE units for various reasons, they are (generally) a task-oriented group who see ICE investigation as an important job which they want to perform to the best of their ability. There are, however, numerous daily work challenges and stressors. Consistent with prior research involving general child abuse investigators (Wright et al., 2006), case material was not perceived to be a particularly significant stressor. This finding requires further research, as it contradicts intuition and workplace health and safety policies focused on limiting investigators’ exposure to ICE material or limiting ICE investigation tenure in order to minimise psychological harm. Three sources of stress were identified including: work relationships, resources and physical environment. In the remainder of this section, we evaluate the results within the broader organisational psychology and policing literature and provide recommendations for police managers.

Work relationships

The reported benefits of forming positive relationships with colleagues and supervisors indicates that collaboration provides ICE investigators access to informal social support, both expressive (debriefing) and instrumental (knowledge sharing, skill acquisition and workload sharing). Previous research with ICE investigators indicates that expressive forms of social support, such as sharing jokes or vulnerability, are considered valuable contributors to resilience (Burns et al., 2008; Krause, 2009; Perez et al., 2010). Instrumental support such as providing opportunities for professional development can counteract negative influences of high workload and emotional demands on work engagement, and lessen emotional exhaustion (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

According to the job demands-resources (J D-R) model, our results suggest functional collaborative relationships within the ICE investigation teams provide members with coping resources that facilitate job performance and buffer against job stressors (Demerouti and Bakker, 2011). Conflict
between team members, and relationships and collaboration with others are perceived to be major challenges. Research indicates relational conflict (conflict based in personality or values) lessens trust, respect and group cohesion while reducing performance (Jehn et al., 2008). Conflict lessens willingness to extend emotional social support (Fujiwara et al., 2003) which may increase vulnerability to role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008). Given that ICE investigators derive a great deal of satisfaction from successful investigations and (according to the J D-R model) work success is a coping resource (Demerouti and Bakker, 2011), the interference of relational conflict with conducting successful investigations lessens access to emotional support and deprives investigators of a coping resource that buffers distress.

Relationships with overseas-based investigators and the judiciary were also identified as sources of stress due to time pressures, limited autonomy and differences in case prioritisation. Current findings are consistent with prior ICE research by Burns et al. (2008) and the J D-R model which indicates workplace autonomy is a valuable coping resource (Demerouti and Bakker, 2011) as decreased control over workload (due in this case to inadequate relationships with external agencies) increases work stress.

**Workload and resources**

Workload can be crudely defined as the amount of effort expended in order to meet task demands. Workload is affected by the ability of an individual employee to produce a desired level of performance (influenced by knowledge, skills, abilities, equipment, well-being and motivation) while coping with task demands and the environment (physical, social and technical) in which the task is performed (see Macdonald, 2003 for review). Participants in the current study showed signs of role overload. This was due to perceived difficulty meeting both quantitative and qualitative workload. Qualitative role overload occurs when employees’ knowledge, skills or abilities are insufficient. Quantitative role overload results from having too little time to complete allotted tasks considering work volume and resource limitations (Beehr and Glazer, 2005). Excessive workload, whether measured globally or differentiated into qualitative and quantitative components, has generally been found to harm employees (Dollard et al., 2012). Excessive workload has also been mentioned as a stressor in previous ICE-specific research (Burns et al., 2008; Perez et al., 2010).

Police members’ remarks identified a number of potential causes of qualitative overload. These include unclear guidelines associated with collating evidence, limited professional development opportunities and hiring inexperienced staff. Reducing qualitative overload would involve providing training, as knowledge deficiency is fundamental to the qualitative overload process. Provision of ICE-specific training is a form of organisational support, signalling that the organisation understands their professional needs and values their work. ICE investigators receiving organisational support in the form of training report better occupational well-being (Burns et al., 2008; Krause, 2009; Perez et al., 2010). Furthermore, acquiring ICE-specific skills meets a fundamental human need for competence which should enhance intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Intrinsically motivated ICE investigators appear to be more resilient than extrinsically motivated investigators.
According to the J D-R model, training is motivational and a coping resource (Demerouti and Bakker, 2011).

Participants’ comments suggest various sources of quantitative overload. For example examining hard drives to establish ownership of files is time-consuming as is cataloguing each individual item for use in court. Courts impose tight timeframes and waiting for responses from collaborative partners causes delays. When an investigator is temporarily reassigned, their ICE work remains undone, increasing the backlog of ICE cases. There are signs of role conflict (experienced when attempting to meet two or more incompatible demands) and role ambiguity (occurring when responsibilities and objectives are unclear) (Beehr and Glazer, 2005). These appear related to the combination of quantitative overload and lack of established guidelines. Participant comments suggest role conflict and role ambiguity manifest as difficulty prioritising between tasks. Role ambiguity and role conflict have been negatively associated with work engagement and perceived organisational support and positively associated with burnout (Crawford et al., 2010).

One potential solution for quantitative overload could be hiring more staff, although this may be impractical. Care must be taken to screen candidates in order to select those most likely to be resilient, with the unique skill set necessary for providing a genuine workload contribution. Participants mentioned that employees who cannot cope only increase the workload of those who can. As participants suggested, using software that reliably and automatically catalogues known images offers the best means of reducing workload and exposure to ICE material (Perez et al., 2010).

**Physical environment**

The officers’ comments regarding the physical environment indicated that ICE investigation typically does not have an area designed specifically for officers’ needs. Open plan offices, although providing a sociable work atmosphere, compromise privacy and security and are unsuitable for conducting some investigative duties such as receiving telephone calls from offenders. Burns et al. (2008) also supported the officers’ concern about employees unnecessarily viewing distressing material. The logical compromise is a combination of private (isolated and soundproof) and open-plan workspace.

The second issue raised by investigators was that of discomfort, caused by confined spaces, poor ventilation, no natural light, heat from computers and ergonomically unsuitable furniture. Applying the J D-R model, physical discomfort is a workplace demand, exacting costs but not supplying a compensatory coping resource or increasing investigative capacity. As such, physical discomfort decreases employee well-being (Demerouti and Bakker, 2011). Redesigning office spaces to allow natural light, using moveable screens to address privacy and noise issues, and providing highly adjustable chairs and ergonomics training reduces musculoskeletal injuries amongst computer workers (Robertson, 2007). Thus, redesigning ICE workspaces, educating ICE investigators about correct use of office equipment and improved resourcing in general would probably be beneficial.
Conclusion

This exploratory study, using in-depth anonymous qualitative interviews, has identified facets of ICE work that investigators perceive to be most stressful. Consistent with previous research using a sample of more generalist child abuse investigators (Powell et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2006), exposure to case material was not an especially salient stressor. Stressors associated with ICE investigation related to three areas; work relationships, workload and resources and the physical environment. Investigators’ accounts of their work experiences suggest positive workplace relationships buffer stressors associated with high workload and challenging work procedures. Negative workplace relationships, combined with an uncomfortable and functionally unsuitable physical environment create stress for investigators. These stressors place physical, psychological and social restrictions on investigative capacity. The broader literature supports the conclusion that modifying the ICE workplace structure, procedures and practices would likely reduce the potential for harm associated with ICE investigation. Specifically, workplace environments should be modified to facilitate more effective professional collaboration, reduce workload and enhance investigator efficiency and the functionality of the physical work environment.

References


Further reading


Note

One police member, who had already left the child exploitation area, admitted that he was personally affected by the work at the time, however he did not attribute blame to the organisations but rather his own inability to find appropriate coping strategies.

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Acknowledgments:

The research was funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (LP0990449) with all Australian police organisations as research partners. The authors are grateful to Dr Rita Cauchi, all police participants and Sergeant Cameron Craig for their assistance with this project.