

2021-06

**How has my parent's involvement in the union affect my life?**

September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Word Count: 826

### **How has my parent's involvement in the union affected my life?**

My Dad has been involved in the union for a number of years now. As I grew up I watched his job shift from being a Correctional Officer inside the institutions to now working for the Union of Correctional Officers. His involvement in the union has undoubtedly impacted my family and I in a number of ways, many negative but also many positive. There is the emotional drain on my father that comes along with being a member of the union and the missed time away from home; but alongside these his work has taught me the importance of having strong unions to protect workers and has given me pride in knowing my Dad plays a large role in ensuring safe and fair working conditions for all Correctional Officers in Ontario.

As a current nursing student, a popular topic of discussion (especially given the current working conditions for nurses among this pandemic) is burnout – particularly emotional burnout. Nursing is a caring profession, and many nurses cannot help but to take on their patients' problems and make them their own. The problem with this is that they often don't leave themselves enough energy or strength to tackle problems they may be facing in their personal lives. These conversations and lectures often make me think about my dad and what he deals with at work. One of his main roles is to listen to members' work-related issues and offer support in finding resolutions. His job revolves around making workers' problems his own in order to help solve them. The popular joke in our house is that Dad should not be tired when he comes home from work because he "just sits in meetings or talks on the phone all day"; but all jokes aside, taking on some of the burden of the challenges Correctional Officers face at work and putting it on his own shoulders would be emotionally exhausting, especially given the nature of a Correctional Officer's job. Many of the issues that Correctional officers face often have to do with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from traumatic events like stabbings, overdoses, suicides, or

harassment within the institutions; as well as Workplace Safety and Insurance Board claims from injuries that occur at work. These are often very heavy topics and can be emotionally draining to deal with on a daily basis. At home, our house consists of us three girls and my Dad, so it is safe to say there was a fair amount of drama going on in our house growing up. While I think my Dad did an exceptional job of playing mediator between the three of us, I can only imagine how hard it must have been for him to help people navigate issues all day at work and then come home to help us deal with whatever problems we were facing in our lives. My Dad hid the strain it had on him well, but that does not mean it was not there.

Being the President of Ontario comes with a fair amount of travel, which means a fair amount of time spent away from home. This time away was not just time away from our house and our family, it was missed sporting games, missed family events or missed time spent throwing in the backyard. It is not only his time away from home that interrupts our family, but on top of this are the never-ending phone calls. For most professions the work ends once you get in your car and drive home, but thanks to his cellphone my Dad's work often follows him home or even on vacation. I can recall numerous times the phone would ring while we were at dinner, on a beach, or camping and my Dad insisted on picking it up. If there was one thing you could count on when driving anywhere with my Dad it was that you would have to sit through at least one phone call from someone from work. While I appreciate how dedicated my Dad is to his work and to other Correctional Officers, I cannot count the number of times it got in the way of family activities.

As hard as it was to have my Dad miss out on life moments growing up it has shown me how important it is to have strong unions. The union is responsible for negotiating contracts, dealing with regional issues, helping locals deal with work related issues and helping members

deal with institutional and personal problems. As a future nurse and member of the Ontario Nurses Association, seeing how hard my Dad and his coworkers work to ensure their workers have the best work conditions gives me comfort and confidence that my union will represent me in the same way. It makes me proud to know that my Dad is one of the people that is working so hard to protect Correctional Officers across Ontario.

Due Date: 09/04/2021

### How does COVID-19 affect Correctional Officers and their families?

Last year, the entire world was unexpectedly caught off guard by the rapidly spreading coronavirus. What first started as an isolated incident quickly evolved into a global pandemic that struck fear into the hearts of billions. While the majority of the population was forced to remain at home, essential workers such as doctors, nurses and grocery store employees were still required to leave the safety of their homes to go to work. Correctional Officers were among the few essential workers that were still required to do their job during the pandemic, however the already difficult job was made even more challenging due to the coronavirus. Correctional Officers and their families were affected by COVID-19 due to the added stress from increased prison protocols, claustrophobic working conditions where the virus can quickly spread and the constant fear of bringing the coronavirus home to their families.

A Correctional Officer's job is already difficult enough, they have to work with violent inmates on a daily basis while micromanaging their other duties, and now they must also be mindful of COVID-19 regulations. Six prisons in Canada have reported viral outbreaks, with three recording over 20% cumulative COVID-19 prevalence among prisoners (Government Of Canada). With coronavirus already appearing in prison facilities around the country, Correctional Officers have to wear a mask, as well as plastic gloves and a face shield or goggles for eye and face protection. All this extra equipment is uncomfortable and distracting to the Correctional Officers whose concern and focus should be on the inmates and security of the facility. Even with Covid protocols, prisons are still allowing family visits for the inmates. However, Correctional Officers still are required to thoroughly search visitors, which involves them to physically pat visitors down and search through their belongings for potential drugs or weapons. It is impossible to follow covid protocols if your job requires you to properly search people, then on top of that there is the possibility of catching covid yourself. COVID-19 regulations have caused added stress to an already stressful job.

Secondly, correctional facilities are often overpopulated, therefore they are vulnerable to COVID-19 outbreaks. As of March 31, there have been a total of 1540 confirmed COVID-19 cases and five deaths among Canada's federal inmate population, which averages around 14000 people with 14 active cases currently (Rodriguez). Socially distancing within a prison facility is impossible, making it very easy for COVID-19 to spread. Coronavirus outbreaks inside Canada's correctional facilities greatly affect both the inmates and Correctional Officers because they are both inside the same claustrophobic facilities getting exposed to the virus. In a prison institution, it is very easy for COVID-19 to spread which makes work for a Correctional Officer even more dangerous.

Finally, there is the constant fear that a Correctional Officer might bring COVID-19 home to their family. Correctional Officers work in close contact with dozens of inmates on a daily basis, not knowing if any of them have come into contact with COVID-19. Last month, reports found that only 37% of inmates received vaccines at the Ontario run Maplehurst Correctional Complex in Milton (Rodriguez). With less than half of the inmates receiving vaccines, it greatly increases the chance that an infected inmate will come into contact with a Correctional Officer. Canada's Correctional Officers are constantly afraid that they could get their family members sick, which can lead to death or even more outbreaks in their community. Bringing home COVID-19 is a frightening but very real possibility that correctional officers face, which is taking a toll on their mental health.

Therefore, correctional officers and their families were affected by COVID-19 due to the added stress of new protocols and regulations, prison complexes are vulnerable to coronavirus outbreaks and the constant fear of infecting members of their family after contracting COVID-19 at the correctional facility.

## Works Cited

Canada, Public Health Agency of. "Government of Canada." *COVID-19 Outbreaks in Canadian Federal Prisons: Analysis of Testing to Inform Prevention and Surveillance Efforts*, *CCDR 47(1)* - *Canada.ca*, / Gouvernement Du Canada, 18 Feb. 2021, [www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/reports-publications/canada-communicable-disease-report-ccdr/monthly-issue/2021-47/issue-1-january-2021/covid-19-federal-prisons.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/reports-publications/canada-communicable-disease-report-ccdr/monthly-issue/2021-47/issue-1-january-2021/covid-19-federal-prisons.html).

Rodriguez, Jeremiah. "Public Health Crisis!: Canada's Prison Conditions during Pandemic Being Investigated." *Coronavirus*, CTV News, 5 Apr. 2021, [www.ctvnews.ca/mobile/health/coronavirus/public-health-crisis-canada-s-prison-conditions-during-pandemic-being-investigated-1.5375277](http://www.ctvnews.ca/mobile/health/coronavirus/public-health-crisis-canada-s-prison-conditions-during-pandemic-being-investigated-1.5375277).

Written By:

Louis Plottel

Louis Plottel joined the CTN and The Centre for Health Evaluation and Outcomes Sciences (CHÉOS) in early 2020 as a Research Assistant and Communications Coordinator. He holds a Masters in Anthropology from SOAS University. "Uncovering the Impact of COVID-19 in Canadian Prisons: News." *CIHR Canadian HIV Trials Network*, 6 Apr. 2021, [www.hivnet.ubc.ca/news/2021/02/determining-the-impact-of-covid-19-in-canadian-prisons/](http://www.hivnet.ubc.ca/news/2021/02/determining-the-impact-of-covid-19-in-canadian-prisons/).

**Correctional Officers have an exceptionally high rate of PTSI then most other similar jobs. How has this affected your family?**

Post-traumatic stress injury is a condition that I knew nothing about until it affected my family. It is defined as a mental health condition that is triggered by a terrifying event which is experienced or witnessed. Some symptoms may include, but are not limited to, flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety as well as uncontrolled thoughts about the event.

I was 14 years old when I first heard the term PTSD, (now called PTSI). My mother had been a Correctional Officer for 20 years at that time. She liked her job, the people she worked with and was upbeat and happy. She would go to work and come home and ask about our day.

Then, all of a sudden, it changed. My mother came home one day and hardly spoke at all. It was like she was mad at everyone. As the days went by, she secluded herself in her room, or would sit alone outside. It was like she was a different person, depressed, irritable, on edge or extremely quiet. Something had happened but I didn't know what. She began calling in sick, which was uncommon for her, but then, she stopped going to work altogether. For months she stayed home, hardly left the house. She slept a lot and seemed to fall deeper into isolation.

Mom looked different, acted different. She used to drink "socially" but was now drinking all the time.

My father explained that "something" had happened at work and it affected my mother severely. He said she needed time to work through it. But, as time passed, things only got worse. Dad encouraged my mother to go to the doctor and ask for a referral to a Psychologist. She complied and began seeing a therapist a couple times per week. After a few months, she seemed better and actually looked forward to her sessions with the therapist.



My mother returned to work a few days per week, then eventually returned full time. The light in her eyes returned. The mother I missed was back. Although she still won't talk to me about it, I know that whatever she witnessed or endured was tragic. Talking to a therapist really seemed to bring her out of her shell.

I am 17 years old now and know a lot more about PTSI and the affect it has on people. I know my mother has encouraged other Correctional Officers to speak to professionals when they are feeling overwhelmed. She knows personally how stress can affect you.

PTSI is real. It affects the mind, body and soul. It also affects those who are close to the individual. Many people experience problems with trust, performance, changes in mood and behaviour. It affects the whole family unit as it did with my family. We were lucky, my mother sought help.

People need to realize that seeking help for mental health does not make you a "weak" person, it makes you a "strong" person. You don't have to go through it alone.