

## *Lithuanian State Border Guard Service officers' traumatic experiences and their psychological counselling needs and attitudes*

### BACKGROUND

State Border Guards (SBGs) are an under-researched group in law enforcement. Their role involves exposure to threats and actual traumatic events. This study is designed to assess the nature of SBGs' traumatic experiences, their perceptions of their need for psychological counselling and their attitudes towards counselling.

### PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

168 Lithuanian State Border Guard Service (SBGS) officers were surveyed, using the following tools: a modified form of the Life Events Checklist (LEC), six questions to assess the need and attitudes towards psychological counselling, and socio-demographic variables.

### RESULTS

72.6% of the sample reported direct exposure to at least one type of traumatic event, 73.2% reported indirect exposure, and 64.3% reported exposure to trauma at work

during the previous 5 years. Those who experienced more different types of direct traumatic events are more inclined to feel uneasy if their colleagues knew about them needing psychological help, more willing to look for help outside of their current employer, more likely to think that their boss might fire them if their need for psychological help became known, and less likely to think that psychological help at work is easily accessible.

### CONCLUSIONS

SBGS officers with more extensive direct traumatic event exposure exhibit more negative attitudes towards psychological counselling than their less traumatized counterparts.

### KEY WORDS

state border security; psychotraumatology; attitudes towards psychological support; demand for psychological counselling

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS – A: Study design · B: Data collection · C: Statistical analysis · D: Data interpretation · E: Manuscript preparation · F: Literature search · G: Funds collection

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## BACKGROUND

### TRAUMATIC EXPOSURE

According to DSM-5 (APA, 2013), the definition of trauma includes events which involve actual or threatened death, serious physical injury or sexual violence. Exposure to one or more stressful or traumatic events can lead to mental health disorders specifically associated with stress (ICD-11, 2019).

There is evidence to suggest that trauma narratives are dominated by sensorial/perceptual aspects and deficits in encoding, which facilitates involuntary memories associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Crespo & Fernandez-Lansac, 2016), a disorder characterized by intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in thinking and mood, or changes in physical and emotional reactions (APA, 2013).

Over 70% of people worldwide report that they have experienced a traumatic event; about a third state having experienced three or more traumatic events (Benjet et al., 2015). Traumatic events that people report most often are accidents, threatening diseases and violence (Lamoureux-Lamarche & Vasiliadis, 2017; Husky, Lépine, Gasquet, & Kovess-Masfety, 2015).

### TRAUMATIC EXPOSURE AMONG THE STATE BORDER GUARD SERVICE AND OTHER LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSONNEL

State Border Guard Service (SBGS) officers work in an environment where the risk of experiencing potentially traumatic events is significant. 74% of Israeli SBGS officers report having experienced at least one traumatic event at work (Malach-Pines & Keinan, 2006), US border patrol guards report experiencing physical assault, stonings and shootings (Nuñez-Neto, 2008). Moreover, working in the SBGS is known as “dirty work” (Rivera & Tracy, 2014) due to the fact that the officers place themselves in physical risk and find themselves in close contact with stigmatized populations such as criminals or immigrants. Sometimes employees in the SBGS even use morally questionable methods such as force or coercion (Rivera & Tracy, 2014).

Yet traumatic exposure in the SBGS has not been researched thoroughly and information is scarce. Society knows very little about this line of work; most opinions are formed by the media using mixed messages, portraying work in the SBGS as heroic in some stories and in others emphasizing the abuse, power or inappropriate decisions of the officers (Rivera & Tracy, 2014).

### THE NEED OF PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLING AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS IT AMONG LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSONNEL

The demand for psychological help and attitudes towards it have not been investigated to date in the SBGS. Analyses of law enforcement personnel’s demand for counselling and attitudes towards it are most often based on research of police samples, in which studies reveal a careful or relatively neutral attitude to receiving psychological help (Karaffa & Tochkov, 2013). Many officers state their preference to receive psychological help outside of the law enforcement system (Naz, 2012) and often only disclose emotional details to trusted sources such as family or friends (Reavley et al., 2018). Personal information is shared with leaders or supervisors only in cases of strong and trust-based relationships (Heffren & Hausdorf, 2016).

Barriers to seeking psychological help and reserved attitudes towards receiving counselling are often thought to be rooted in mental health stigma, which is quite common in law enforcement (Tucker, 2015; Ménard, Arter, & Khan, 2016). Another obstacle to seeking mental health help might be the traditional male-dominated environment and the conventional understanding of masculinity which are prevalent in the law enforcement system (Guajardo, 2016). The traditional male role is associated with rarer help-seeking behaviours (Sullivan, Camic, & Brown, 2015) and the belief that outside help is unnecessary to solve one’s problems (Johnson, Oliffe, Kelly, Galdas, & Ogrodniczuk, 2012).

Most of the current information on the need for psychological counselling and attitudes towards counselling is based on police, but not other professions in law enforcement. It suggests that an analysis of SBGs might yield similar results, such as reserved attitudes towards counselling.

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRAUMATIC EXPOSURE COUNSELLING NEEDS AND ATTITUDES

Limited research into trauma and help-seeking in law enforcement shows that both traumatized and non-traumatized officers are more likely to look for help among their close friends and family than professionals (Heffren & Hausdorf, 2016). Traumatized officers more often endorse mental health stigma (Soomro & Yanos, 2019), which in turn is likely to be a barrier to help-seeking. These findings lead to a hypothesis that a relationship exists between SBGS officers’ traumatic exposure and their psychological counselling needs and attitudes.

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## PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

This observational study involved SBGS officers working in four geographically spread out and differently-sized branches of the Lithuanian border patrol system. The study took place in April–November 2015 and employed multistage stratified cluster probability sampling. A supervisor from each branch helped contact and inform potential participants, excluding those in training or working in classified positions. The procedure was designed with the approval and help of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania.

The participants were enrolled after obtaining their informed consent, and filled out anonymous surveys during work hours with a researcher present. The survey took about 30 minutes to fill out. In order to ensure confidentiality, each survey was presented to the participants in an envelope which had to be sealed by each participant upon completion before handing it back to the researcher. Ethics approval for the study was provided by the Kaunas Regional Biomedical Research Ethics Committee (reference number BE-2-4).

Number of experienced traumatic event types (traumatic exposure) was measured using an author-modified form of the Life Events Checklist (Johnson & McCutcheon, 1980), a self-report measure that is used to count the number of different traumatic events a person has been exposed to in the last 5 years. The LEC consists of 17 items (natural disaster, sexual assault, motor vehicle accident, etc.). Participants indicate their experience of each of the events using the following response options: “this happened to me personally” (direct trauma), “this happened to a close person and I learned of it afterwards” (indirect trauma), and “I participated in this event, or it happened to me, at work” (work trauma). The number of experienced traumatic event types is summed into three separate scores to reflect the amount of direct, indirect, and work exposure.

Attitudes towards psychological counselling were measured using five questions scored on a Likert-type scale from *totally agree* to *totally disagree*: “The help of a psychologist in case of violence or a work crisis is easily accessible”, “I would feel awkward if my colleagues knew I was in need of psychological counselling”, “I would rather get psychological counselling outside of the system in which I am currently employed”, “I think I might lose my job if my boss knew I was in need of psychological counselling”, “I think psychological counselling really helps with tension and stress at work”. The perceived need for psychological help was assessed with one question scored on a Likert-type scale from *totally agree* to *totally disagree*: “I would like to consult a psychologist because of work tension and critical cases”. The responses to all six questions were recoded into binary “agree/disagree” answers.

Demographic variables covered gender, age, years of employment in law enforcement, education level (secondary or lower; higher than secondary), and relationship status (married or in a relationship; single or other).

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics software version 25.0. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficients were used to assess the reliability of the measuring instruments. The level of statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$ . The data were summarized to provide descriptive statistics: means and standard deviations for normally distributed data, medians and interquartile ranges (IQR) for data that significantly differed from a normal distribution, and percentages for all other variables. The Mann-Whitney  $U$  test was used to analyze the significance of differences between two groups.

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## RESULTS

### DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

The sample consisted of 171 SBGS officers. After removing cases with incomplete data on psychological counselling needs and attitudes, 168 respondents were included in further analyses. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. 6.7% of respondents provided at least one incomplete

Table 1  
*Demographic characteristics of the sample*

Age	
Range	20-51
Mean	32.00
SD	8.52
Years in law enforcement	
Range	0-30
Mean	10.43
SD	8.01
Gender	
Male	69.6% (117)
Female	28.6% (48)
Education	
Secondary or lower	39.3% (66)
Higher than secondary	57.1% (96)
Relationship status	
Single or other	15.5% (26)
In a relationship or married	81.5% (137)

variable of demographic data. Participants with and without missing data did not differ with regards to traumatic exposure and counselling needs and attitudes; due to this reason, participants with missing data were excluded from the statistical analyses which took demographics into account; otherwise they were included, recognizing the size of the sample and the difficulty of accessing more participants in this particular population.

The number of experienced traumatic event types was not associated with age, years of work experience in the Lithuanian law enforcement system, gender, education, and relationship status (see Tables 2 and 3).

Overall the results show that the officers' traumatic exposure is highest in the indirect traumatic events category, yet overall traumatic exposure carries no link to demographic characteristics of the sample.

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## TRAUMATIC EXPOSURE

Most officers reported having had some kind of traumatic experience in the previous five years. 72.6% of the sample reported direct exposure to at least one type of traumatic event, 73.2% reported indirect exposure, and 64.3% reported exposure to trauma at work during the previous 5 years.

Mean numbers of traumatic event types in the last 5 years were 2.54 for directly experienced events ( $Me = 2$ ,  $IQR = 0-4$ ), 2.44 ( $Me = 1$ ,  $IQR = 0-3.75$ ) for traumatic events at work, and 3.28 ( $Me = 2$ ,  $IQR = 0-6$ ) for indirectly experienced traumatic events.

## COUNSELLING NEEDS AND ATTITUDES

Overall, 11.9% of the sample rather agree that they would like to consult a psychologist because of work stress and crises; 36.9% rather agree that psychological help is easily accessible at work; 39.9% rather agree that they would feel uneasy if their colleagues knew about their need for psychological help; 50.0% rather agree that they would choose a psychologist outside of their current employer; 22.0% rather agree that they might be fired if their boss found out about their need for psychological help; and 57.1% rather agree that psychological counselling is helpful in cases of work tension and stress.

Table 2

*Differences in number of experienced traumatic event types among demographic groups*

Categorical variables	Number of experienced traumatic event types ( $Me$ , $IQR$ )					
	Direct trauma	$p$	Indirect trauma	$p$	Work trauma	$p$
Male	2 0-4	.501	1 1-4	.058	1 0-3	.515
Female	2 1-3.75		2 1-7		1 0-4	
Secondary and lower	2 0-4	.854	2 0-6.25	.806	1 0-4	.621
Higher than secondary	2 0.25-3.75		2 1-6		1 0-3.75	
Single or other	2 0.75-4.25	.457	1 0-6.5	.961	1 0-3	.615
In a relationship or married	2 0-4		2 0.5-5.5		1 0-4	

Table 3

*Relationship of number of experienced traumatic event types with age and years in law enforcement*

Categorical variables	Number of experienced traumatic event types					
	Direct trauma	$p$	Indirect trauma	$p$	Work trauma	$p$
Age	$\rho = -.048$	.548	$\rho = -.091$	.251	$\rho = -.104$	.189
Years in law enforcement	$\rho = -.045$	.572	$\rho = -.141$	.076	$\rho = -.101$	.205

The respondents' perceived need for psychological counselling is not associated with any demographic variables. Only a few aspects of attitudes towards psychological help are related to demographic variables (see Tables 4 and 5). Older respondents, those who have worked in the interior

service system longer, and those who have higher education are more likely to consider psychological help useful in cases of work stress and tension. Respondents with higher education are more likely to think that they might be fired if their employer knew about their need for psychological help, al-

Table 4

*Differences in age and years in law enforcement (M, SD) in accordance with counselling needs and attitudes*

		Age		Years in law enforcement	
Would like to consult a psychologist because of work stress and crises	Rather agrees	31.37 (7.44)	$p = .870$	10.44 (7.74)	$p = .958$
	Rather disagrees	32.17 (8.60)		10.51 (8.18)	
Psychological help at work is accessible	Rather agrees	32.51 (8.69)	$p = .585$	11.34 (8.04)	$p = .245$
	Rather disagrees	31.87 (8.36)		10.15 (8.09)	
Would feel uneasy if colleagues knew they needed psychological help	Rather agrees	32.25 (8.62)	$p = .939$	10.89 (7.94)	$p = .524$
	Rather disagrees	32.15 (8.40)		10.36 (8.16)	
Would rather get help outside of the system	Rather agrees	32.70 (8.40)	$p = .499$	11.37 (7.90)	$p = .204$
	Rather disagrees	31.70 (8.71)		9.91 (8.25)	
Think they might be fired if boss knew they needed psychological help	Rather agrees	34.64 (9.09)	$p = .055$	12.19 (8.01)	$p = .187$
	Rather disagrees	31.49 (8.05)		10.13 (8.03)	
Psychological help is useful for work stress and tension	Rather agrees	33.76 (8.41)	$p = .003$	12.12 (8.10)	$p = .004$
	Rather disagrees	29.90 (8.00)		8.48 (7.58)	

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Table 5

*Counselling needs and attitudes among different gender, education, and relationship status groups*

	Percentage of respondents who agree with the listed items					
	Male	Female	Secondary or lower	Higher	Single or other	In a relationship
Would like to consult a psychologist because of work stress and crises	14.9%	6.4%	9.7%	11.5%	24.0%	10.4%
	OR = 2.57 [0.72, 9.23]		OR = 0.83 [0.29, 2.37]		OR = 2.71 [0.93, 7.91]	
Considers psychological help at work accessible	43.8%	26.1%	40.3%	38.7%	40.0%	38.6%
	OR = 2.20 [1.03, 4.70]*		OR = 1.07 [0.56, 2.07]		OR = 1.06 [0.44, 2.54]	
Would feel uneasy if colleagues knew they needed psychological help	46.0%	31.2%	43.5%	38.5%	40.0%	42.2%
	OR = 1.88 [0.92, 3.83]		OR = 1.23 [0.64, 2.35]		OR = 0.91 [0.38, 2.18]	
Would rather get help outside of the system	53.6%	48.9%	46.8%	55.3%	52.2%	51.9%
	OR = 1.20 [0.61, 2.38]		OR = 0.71 [0.37, 1.35]		OR = 1.01 [0.42, 2.46]	
Thinks they might be fired if boss knew they needed psychological help	25.2%	19.1%	13.1%	27.7%	20.8%	24.1%
	OR = 1.42 [0.61, 3.31]		OR = 0.40 [0.17, 0.94]*		OR = 1.83 [0.29, 2.40]	
Considers psychological help to be useful with work stress and tension	62.4%	60.0%	50.8%	68.5%	60.0%	61.7%
	OR = 1.11 [0.54, 2.25]		OR = 0.48 [0.24, 0.93]*		OR = 0.93 [0.39, 2.23]	

Note. \* $p < .05$ .

though this result might be due to an association between education and older age. Men are more likely than women to consider psychological help at work accessible.

#### TRAUMATIC EXPOSURE AND COUNSELLING NEEDS AND ATTITUDES

Those who have experienced more different types of direct traumatic events are more inclined to feel uneasy if their colleagues knew about them needing psychological help, more willing to look for help outside of their current employer, more likely to think that their boss might fire them if their need for psychological help became known, and less likely to think that psychological help at work is easily accessible (see Table 6). The amount of indirect traumatic event types and work traumatic event types is not associated with counselling needs and attitudes.

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## DISCUSSION

This is one of the very few studies addressing the mental health of SBGS officers and possibly the first one to analyze traumatic exposure and attitudes to psychological counselling in this population.

About 73% of the officers report exposure to direct or indirect traumas in their personal lives, and about 64% report exposure to traumatic events at work. The latter result is somewhat similar to a study of Israeli SBGS officers where the prevalence of work trauma was 74% (Malach-Pines & Keinan, 2006). Having in mind the constant tension and threat of armed conflict in the Israeli SBGS, the prevalence of traumatic events at work in the Lithuanian sample seems rather high in comparison. However, research on other professions in the law enforcement system shows that the prevalence of traumatic events at work is upwards of 70% among firefighters (Lee, Lee, Kim, Jeon, & Sim, 2017; Park, 2019; Wiegand & Chiu, 2017)

Table 6  
*Traumatic exposure, counselling needs and attitudes*

		Number of traumatic experience types ( <i>Me</i> , IQR)					
		Direct trauma	<i>p</i>	Indirect trauma	<i>p</i>	Work trauma	<i>p</i>
Would like to consult a psychologist because of work stress and crises	Rather agrees	2.5 1.25-4.75	.074	1 1-3.75	.704	1 0-2	.431
	Rather disagrees	2 0-3.25		2 0-6		1 0-4	
Psychological help at work is accessible	Rather agrees	1 0-3	.034	2 0-3.25	.332	1 0-3	.783
	Rather disagrees	2 1-4		2 1-6		1 0-4	
Would feel uneasy if colleagues knew they needed psychological help	Rather agrees	3 1-5	< .001	3 1-6	.130	2 0-5	.060
	Rather disagrees	1 0-3		1 0-5		1 0-3	
Would rather get help outside of the system	Rather agrees	2 1-4	.015	2 0-6	.929	2 0-5	.295
	Rather disagrees	2 0-3		2 0.5-5		1 0-3	
Think they might be fired if boss knew they needed psychological help	Rather agrees	3 1-4	.037	2.5 1-4.75	.201	1 0-5	.782
	Rather disagrees	2 0-3		1 0-6		1 0-3	
Psychological help is useful for work stress and tension	Rather agrees	2 1-4	.291	2 1-4.5	.462	1 0-4	.764
	Rather disagrees	1.5 0-4		1 0-6.25		1 0-3.25	

and upwards of 84% among police officers (Levy-Gigi, Richter-Levin, & Kéri, 2014; Martin, Marchand, & Boyer, 2009; Thornton & Herndon, 2016), which leads to the conclusion that traumatic exposure at work is quite typical for the current sample.

Interestingly, the respondents' perceived need of psychological counselling was not associated with any demographic variables. This finding partly contradicts studies in similar populations, where being married or a woman is thought to be positively associated with help-seeking intentions (Blais & Renshaw, 2013; Roberts et al., 2018). Heffren and Hausdorf (2016) provide some insight by explaining that when an officer feels comfortable disclosing, they usually disclose to select trusted sources such as family and friends. It is possible that overall carefulness when disclosing takes precedence over the effects of gender or relationship status in law enforcement; however, more detailed insight into these results is needed.

Our main findings show the association between exposure to more types of direct personal traumatization and some attitudes towards psychological counselling. Those officers who have had exposure to more types of direct trauma are more inclined to feel uneasy if their colleagues knew about them needing psychological help, more willing to look for help outside of their current work system, more likely to think that their boss might fire them if their need for psychological help became known, and less likely to consider psychological help at work to be easily accessible.

The SBGS officers' general carefulness towards psychological help can have various possible explanations. Traumatized law enforcement officers are more likely to endorse mental health stigma (Soomro & Yanos, 2019), which in turn is likely to be a barrier to help-seeking (Greene-Shortridge, Britt, & Castro, 2007). Moreover, as distress escalates, people are less likely to seek help and support (Ryan, Shochet, & Stallman, 2010). The current study did not explore the officers' experience with looking for psychological help and receiving it, yet it might be an important link between psychological traumatization and the attitudes towards psychological help. Possibly the officers could have been unsatisfied with the psychological help they did or did not receive in their vulnerable state after traumatic events, thus leading to more reserved attitudes towards it. This study provides a possible framework for future studies wishing to explore how traumatic events and the experience of and attitudes towards receiving psychological help might be interrelated.

## CONCLUSIONS

The amount of State Border Patrol Guard officers' traumatic exposure is not related to their perceived need of psychological counselling.

A larger amount of direct traumatic exposure is related to some aspects of counselling attitudes, such as feeling uneasy if colleagues found out about one needing counselling, thinking that the employer might fire them in case of counselling, considering counselling at work not easily accessible, and willing to look for help outside of the current employer.

The amount of indirect traumatic exposure and work traumatic exposure is not related to counselling attitudes.

Overall, the conclusion can be drawn that more intense personal exposure to traumatic events is related to partly negative or careful attitudes towards psychological counselling.

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