

Therapy dogs, stress-reduction, and well-being within the detachment: Interviews with law-enforcement personnel

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Despite the increasing popularity of canine-assisted interventions (CAIs) across a variety of contexts, and the demonstrated efficacy they have on stress reduction, there is a paucity of research exploring the implementation of such programs within the context of law enforcement. Policing is known to be an environment in which personnel experience elevated occupational stress. As stress can compromise the overall well-being of law-enforcement personnel and their ability to serve the public, it is important to understand how CAIs involving therapy dog visitation are experienced by the very individuals for whom they are intended to help. This qualitative study explored Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) members' experiences of stress within a detachment and their perceptions of a CAI integrated within their workplace to support their well-being. Eight RCMP members (75% female, $M_{age} = 49.21$, $SD = 6.12$) from an urban RCMP detachment situated in the downtown core of a small city were interviewed. The interview focused on topics including members' experiences of stress within the workplace, their perceptions of the effects of stress, resources and sources of support, and their experiences participating in a weekly CAI within their detachment. Results indicated that organizational stressors were identified more often than operational stressors; that members most commonly reported that stress rendered them more irritable and impacted their sleep, and that the most commonly reported coping mechanism and resource are exercise and medical services, respectively. In discussing the CAI, participants were overwhelmingly positive in their experiences of the program, and demonstrated support for having CAIs within the detachment setting. Discussion of the impact of the sessions demonstrated that participants found that the program served as a break from work, relieved their stress, improved their mood, and helped them to change perspectives. Participants also identified the role of the dogs within the program, which included their role as a social being. The findings from the current study contribute to better understanding of the lived experiences of stress within RCMP members and of CAIs within an applied setting.

Key words: law-enforcement, canine-assisted intervention, stress reduction, therapy dogs

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As part of their routine duties, law-enforcement personnel regularly encounter dangerous situations and are often exposed to distressing events such as acts of mass casualties, deaths of colleagues, terrorism, homicides, and a constant, yet unpredictable, risk to life (Gershon et al., 2009; Gershon et al., 2002; Marmar et al., 2006; Westmarland, 2017). In addition to these potentially life-threatening operational stressors, law-enforcement personnel may experience organizational stressors such as antisocial working hours and shift work, heavy workloads, intermittent work pace, and workplace discrimination (Gershon et al., 2009; Terpstra & Schaap, 2013; White & Robinson, 2014).

Given the stressors associated with the profession, law-enforcement is considered to be amongst the most stressful of all occupations (Anshel, 2000; Ménard & Arter, 2013; Ranta & Sud, 2008). For example, in a study by Queirós et al. (2020), 85% of Portuguese law-enforcement personnel ($N = 2,057$) exceeded the threshold for high operational stress levels and 28% presented as highly-distressed. Working in a high-stress profession places law-enforcement personnel at a heightened risk for compromised physical health including cardiovascular disease and obesity, social concerns such as distrust of others and isolation, familial issues including domestic violence and divorce, maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance abuse and gambling, and overall compromised mental health (Bano & Talib, 2017; Carleton et al., 2018; Gershon et al., 2009; Terpstra & Schaap, 2013; Queirós et al., 2020; Zimmerman, 2012; 2014). In addition, it has been identified that increasing numbers of law-enforcement personnel are at risk of developing psychological disorders (Queirós et al., 2020). Mumford and colleagues (2015) found that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was disclosed by law-enforcement personnel ($N = 184$) at a rate of over double that of the general population (8.8% compared to 3.5%) and that anxiety and depression were reported almost twice as often in law-enforcement personnel compared to the general population. Specifically looking at Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Carleton and colleagues (2018) conducted a survey of 5,813 public safety personnel (PSP; e.g., correctional workers, firefighters, paramedics, dispatchers, and police). In this study, the authors found that 50.2% of the RCMP members surveyed screened positive for an established mental health disorder (i.e., PTSD, major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder or alcohol abuse). Notably, a higher percentage of members screened positive for mental disorders than any other first responder including firefighters, paramedics, dispatchers, and municipal police. In addition, 24.4% of RCMP screened positive for three or more disorders – higher than any other PSP in the study (Carleton et al., 2018).

Literature Review

The literature review that follows will provide an overview of the literature on stress reduction in law-enforcement and on the efficacy of canine-assisted interventions for reducing stress.

Research on Stress Reduction in Law-Enforcement

As a result of this increasing concern for the personal well-being of employees, researchers are starting to examine the efficacy of well-being or stress-reduction programs for law-enforcement personnel. Generalized well-being programs have demonstrated efficacy in improving behavioral, emotional, social, and cognitive outcomes in law-enforcement personnel (Kuehl et al., 2014; 2016; McCraty & Atkinson, 2012) however the implementation of stress-reduction programs specifically is still lacking. Many law-enforcement detachments do not yet have wellness or stress-reduction programs in place

to combat the stress or the resulting physical or mental health concerns that arise within the workplace (Crouch, 2014).

Furthermore, many of the programs that are targeted specifically at stress in law-enforcement are deemed to have limited efficacy. Patterson and colleagues (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of 12 stress-management interventions targeted at law-enforcement personnel published between 1984 and 2008. These interventions included stress-reduction or management programs, individual wellness counselling, stress-inoculation training, and writing interventions, amongst others. Patterson et al. (2014) concluded that, based on the effect sizes from these studies, the interventions were largely ineffective. More recently, Liakopoulou et al. (2020) conducted a randomized controlled trial to assess the effectiveness of the Pythagorean Self-Awareness Intervention (PSAI). The PSAI is a program in which a series cognitive processes are practiced twice a day. These include a general recollection of the day's events followed by a focused recollection and evaluation of a specific event during the day. Finally, and upon completion of these recollections, individuals set specific goals for following day based on their evaluation. Participants in the PSAI group ($N=27$) demonstrated promising results for negative affect, cognitive speed, and verbal memory when compared with the control however, no significant results were found for a reduction in either organizational or operational stress.

The aforementioned study by Crouch (2014) established that 80% of law-enforcement officers were interested in participating in a program to improve their well-being if one were available. Given the negative ramifications of stress, the demands placed upon officers, and the lack of stress-reduction opportunities available to them, research is needed which explores the effective, feasible, and sustainable implementation of programs across agencies.

Research on Canine-Assisted Interventions

One such opportunity to assist agencies in fostering employee well-being lies within the field of human-animal interactions (HAIs). Canine-assisted interventions (CAIs), a category of animal-assisted interventions that fall under the larger umbrella of HAIs (Binfet & Hartwig, 2019), remain under-utilized within law-enforcement despite their surge in popularity and efficacy in augmenting well-being across a variety of contexts and with a variety of clients (Binfet et al., 2018; Binfet & Passmore, 2016; Hoffman et al., 2009; Lang et al., 2010; Stevens et al., 2017). CAIs provide an opportunity for clients or visitors (often university students or seniors) to spend time and interact with certified therapy dog-handler teams (i.e. assessed and credentialed by a therapy dog organization) with the aim of reducing stress and improving well-being. Such interactions have been extensively studied within the post-secondary context and have been shown to be an effective means of increasing social interactions and reducing stress in a population known to experience elevated stress levels (e.g., Binfet, 2017; Binfet et al., 2017; Binfet & Passmore, 2016; Crossman & Kazdin, 2015; Dell et al., 2015; González-Ramírez et al., 2013; Pendry et al., 2018; Trammell, 2017; Ward Griffin et al., 2018).

Although the research is less prolific, there is evidence to suggest that CAIs are beneficial within other high-stress environments such as waiting rooms in emergency departments (Dell et al., 2019); for young children undergoing physical examinations (Nagengast et al., 1997) or residing in pediatric hospital wards (Braun et al., 2009; Tsai et al., 2010); and in forensic interviews with children (Krause-Parello & Friedmann, 2014)

One such example of this is the use of CAIs within the court system. Spruin et al. (2019) conducted an exploratory qualitative study wherein a therapy dog attended court to interact with individuals waiting in a magistrate's court waiting room. Court users ($n = 117$) were interviewed during the visits and retrospective interviews were conducted with court professionals ($n = 8$). The thematic analysis from all participants confirmed that the experience of waiting to attend court was considered highly stressful due to the environment, the long waiting times, and the feeling of constant clock-watching (Spruin et al., 2019). Overall the CAI was perceived positively and court users identified the experience as having a positive and beneficial effect on them, including relaxation, reducing stress, eliciting happiness, and providing emotional support. Notably, only 4 participants reported no effect of the CAI and not a single court user felt that it had been a negative experience (Spruin et al., 2019).

Another notable example is that of CAIs for emergency medicine providers during their shifts (Kline et al., 2020). Kline and colleagues conducted a randomized control trial to examine the efficacy of a CAI during shift work. To do so, they compared the CAI versus colouring a mandala and versus a no-intervention control group. Emergency medicine providers' ($N = 122$) stress was assessed using a stress visual-analogue scale, a perceived stress scale, and salivary cortisol - each taken at the beginning, middle, and end of their shift. The 5-minute intervention (CAI or colouring a mandala) was administered 30-minutes before the second, mid-shift measurement. Results demonstrated that the post-shift self-reported stress levels increased for the control and the colouring conditions yet decreased significantly for the CAI group. In addition, the CAI group was associated with significantly lower salivary cortisol levels at the end of their shift when compared with the control group. This study demonstrates the potential for integrating a brief intervention during a regular shift of emergency medicine providers (Kline et al., 2020).

Despite the efficacy of CAIs to reduce stress in students or in high-stress contexts, there is a paucity of literature that has examined the efficacy of CAIs within a law-enforcement detachment. A careful review of the literature in psychology, sociology and anthrozoology revealed only one study examining the use of a CAI to support the well-being of law-enforcement personnel (Binfet et al., 2020). The aforementioned study, which was a preliminary study that preceded the present study, explored the effect of a CAI integrated within the workplace of law-enforcement personnel (Binfet et al., 2020). Seven therapy dog and handler teams were brought to an urban RCMP detachment, providing opportunities for RCMP members and civic staff to spend time dog-handler teams assessed and credentialed by the B.A.R.K. program. Participants spent, on average, 11 minutes visiting with B.A.R.K. therapy dogs and their handlers. Results demonstrated a significant effect of the intervention ($V = 52, p < .001$) with mean stress decreasing from 3.33 at T1 to 1.95 at T2. In addition, participants' descriptions of their work environment were significantly more positive after attending the CAI than before ($V = 2784.5, p < .001$). Notably pre-test self-reports of stress revealed that 47% of participating RCMP members reported feeling *somewhat-* to *very-stressed*, thus illustrating the importance of introducing an effective well-being initiative in this detachment (Binfet et al., 2020). This initial study helped illuminate our team's understanding around the uptake and the effects of a CAI within a busy detachment however we were left with an incomplete picture of how this CAI was experienced from the perspective of the participants who made use of this work-situated well-being initiative.

Further gaps in the literature have guided this study. It has been argued that organizational support for law-enforcement personnel is under-researched and that more research is needed to explore why police choose to, or not to, use stress-reduction services (Tucker, 2015). It has also been argued that qualitative research methods, which the present study utilizes, are considered valuable, yet underutilized within both occupational stress research (Mazzola et al., 2011; Moreto, 2015) and the field of HAIs (Fournier, 2019; Kazdin, 2017). HAI research could “gain tremendously by more qualitative evaluation of the experience of therapy involving an animal, that is, precisely how participants (children, parents, other adults, therapists, and handlers) experience the interaction” (Kazdin, 2017, p. 156). Finally, as there is an absence of knowledge surrounding law-enforcement personnel’s experience of CAIs within a detachment setting, this study seeks to add valuable knowledge to the fields concerning HAIs and law-enforcement personnel stress/stress-reduction.

The present study was designed as a follow-up study to explore further the lived experiences of law-enforcement personnel stress and of a CAI within a detachment. The aim of this study was to explore Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) personnel’s experiences of a CAI as an initiative to reduce stress within the detachment. The three research questions guide this study:

1. What are RCMP personnel’s perceptions and experiences of stress within the workplace?
2. Do RCMP personnel gain anything from attending the CAI based in their detachment? If so, what are the benefits they experience?
3. What role do therapy dogs play within the context of the CAI based at the detachment?

Both Wilson’s hypothesis of Biophilia (1984) and Cobb’s social support theory (1976) serve as theoretical frameworks to guide this study and subsequent research questions. The Biophilia hypothesis posits that humans have evolved to pay particular attention to nature, living organisms and life-like processes and is suggested to have enhanced the chance of survival in humans (Wilson, 1984). In the early age of humans paying close attention to animals’ behavior would have aided survival as animals would signal a pending threat or, if relaxed, would have implied that the surroundings were safe and secure, and thus, would have been relaxing for our human ancestors (Beetz, 2017). Today, although we no longer live amongst animals in the same way as our early ancestors, humans are still tightly connected to non-human animals. This connection, seen today in our affinity for spending more time at zoological parks than at major sports events (Wilson, 1992; 1993), and the popularity of having animals as companions (Serpell, 1996; 2017; Mornement, 2018). The theory of Biophilia has been supported in more recent research examining the efficacy of animal-assisted interventions (AAIs), in which animals have been found to relieve anxiety, pain, negative affect, and other unpleasant mental states (for a review see Waite et al., 2018).

Cobb’s social support theory (1976) provides a second theoretical framework for this study. Social support is the information that “leads the subject to feel loved and cared for, [...] esteemed and valued, [...] or] to believe that he belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation” (Cobb, 1976, p.300). Cobb (1976) asserts that social support throughout one’s life is protective against stress-related health concerns or crises. Social support is considered to be beneficial within the context of first responders

wherein a relationship has been established between perceived social support and mental health (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2010). In addition, social support or social integration has been shown to mediate the impact and personal appraisal of stressful events (Joseph et al., 1995, Schwarzer et al., 2014). Further, social support theory is relevant to exploring the efficacy of therapy dog programs as research has proposed that canines provide social support equal to, or more beneficial than, humans (Kloep et al., 2017). Both the Biophilia and Social Support theories are relevant to the current study because the existing CAI within the RCMP detachment, which is explored in the present study, is designed to foster close, hands-on contact with therapy canines and to encourage social interactions within the workplace.

Methods

Phase I of this study was a preliminary pilot study that explored the effectiveness of a CAI within an RCMP detachment from a quantitative perspective (Binfet et al., 2020). It strove to answer the question – Do RCMP members and civic staff who attend a CAI hosted at the detachment report significant pre-to-post reductions in self-reports of stress? To do this, seven experienced B.A.R.K. handlers (85% female, $M_{age} = 46.6$ years, $SD = 13.3$, $range = 31-65$) and their therapy dogs (60% male, $M_{age} = 4.64$ years, $SD = 1.65$, $range = 2-6$ years) were brought into an urban law-enforcement detachment for 90-minute, weekly visits for 8 weeks. Participants ($N=120$), who were RCMP members and civic employees, were able to visit during their working day for as long as they chose. Upon arrival and departure, they completed a visual analogue scale to assess pre- and post-test self-reports of stress. Throughout the session they were able to interact with the handlers, therapy dogs, B.A.R.K. program staff, and other attendees. The quantitative analysis, using a paired Wilcoxon signed-rank test demonstrated the efficacy of the CAI, with stress decreasing significantly from pre-to-post visit (Binfet et al., 2020). It is worth noting that this program was approved by both human and animal research ethics (H17-03306, A14-0134) as well as Divisional Research Project approval from the RCMP head office. In addition, a B.A.R.K. program staff member and RCMP liaison were present at all times to ensure canine, handler, and participant welfare.

The present study, Phase II, seeks to explore members' lived experiences of the CAI from a qualitative perspective and to provide context which was not obtained from Phase I. This phase strives to answer – What are the perceptions of RCMP members around workplace stress and the utility of participating in a within-detachment CAI? That is, we knew the intervention was effective in reducing members' self-reports of stress but we did not know why. In order to explore participants' insights and perspectives, we conducted individual, 60-minute interviews with eight RCMP members who had previously attended the CAI program situated within their detachment. These interviews were conducted and recorded by the first author who had prior experience and education in conducting qualitative research interviews. In addition, the first author had attended every CAI session held at the detachment and thus, had developed rapport with attendees. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author and transcripts were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Participants

Participants were recruited using posters placed throughout the detachment, seeking participants who had attended at least one CAI session held within the detachment. Participants were active members (of any rank) currently employed by the RCMP

detachment situated in the downtown core of a mid-size Western Canadian city (population 152,000; Statistics Canada, 2017).

Eight participants were recruited for this study based on recommendations in prior interview-based studies (Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 1994, Creswell, 2007). Guest and colleagues (2006) sought to establish the optimal number of participants that should be recruited in interview studies. To do this, they interviewed 60 participants and analyzed the interviews in groups of six in order to determine at what point data saturation occurred – the point at which new information no longer adds value to themes or overall conclusions of the study. Their findings demonstrated that the majority of high-frequency codes (94%) that emerged from the full data set had already emerged from the first six interviews (Guest et al., 2006). As such, Guest and colleagues concluded that for a study seeking to focus on overarching themes emerging from the data, as is the case with the present study, six interviews would be sufficient to enable meaningful theme-development and useful interpretations (Guest et al., 2008, p.78). For the purpose of this study, the proposed sample size was eight to allow for potential participant attrition. The first eight participants to respond to the recruitment call were enrolled in the study.

Procedure

Human research ethics approval (H17-03306) and Divisional Research Project approval from the RCMP National Office in Ottawa and local detachment were obtained prior to the commencement of this study. Data for this study was collected through individual, in-person, semi-structured interviews with each participant. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they can be utilized effectively when there is ‘sufficient objective knowledge about an experience or phenomenon, but the subjective knowledge is lacking’ (McIntosh & Morse, 2015, p.1). By interviewing a participant, as opposed to administering a series of surveys or questionnaires, the researchers were able to explore, in-depth, the lived experiences of members who choose to attend a CAI.

All interviews were conducted at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan campus at a time convenient to the participants between December 2018 and March 2019. The location of the university, as opposed to the local detachment, was chosen in order to help ensure confidentiality of the participants. Upon arrival at the interview session, participants read the informed consent form and reviewed the study information provided before providing written consent both to participate in the study and to have their interview audio-recorded. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point until the data analysis phase after which time their data would be included in the analysis, although no participants did so. None of the participants declined to participate or refused to be audio-recorded. Next, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire to collect descriptive information about the sample as a whole including age, gender, ethnicity, part-time/full-time status, and length of service with the RCMP. Once complete, participants had an opportunity to ask questions before the interview commenced. Upon completion of the interview, participants were given their remuneration gift certificate of \$50 for a local coffee shop to thank them for their participation.

Measures

Demographic information. Of the eight participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 49.21$, $SD = 6.12$), 6 self-identified as female and 2 as male, all were full-time employees and active members of the RCMP detachment. Participants’ average length of service was 20.25 years ($\text{range} = 10 - 28$ years).

Interviews. Data for this study was collected through individual, in-person, semi-structured interviews with each participant. The interviews lasted, on average, 71 minutes (*range* = 63-77 minutes). All interviews were audio-recorded using a secure recording device (SONY voice recorder), were transcribed verbatim by the first author, and were imported into NVivo™. The audio recordings were imported, encrypted, and saved on a password-protected research computer of the first author. The recordings were deleted from the voice recorder immediately after import. A semi-structured interview guide, with 7 overarching themes and 15 open-ended questions, was used (see **Appendix**). Participants were asked to discuss the following themes: 1) levels of stress; 2) effects of stress; 3) coping mechanisms; 4) sources of support; 5) experiences of the B.A.R.K. program; 6) role of the therapy dogs; and 7) the potential of CAIs within law-enforcement detachments. All participants were assigned a pseudonym and the raw data was only accessible to the first author.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis which has become widely used for participant-generated data and interview-based studies (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Robinson, 2014). This approach aims to examine the words within responses in depth so as to pay attention to the content and context of the text rather than simply counting words (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Conventional content analysis was chosen to interpret the data because it has been identified as an appropriate analysis method when there is limited pre-existing literature on the phenomenon at hand (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The conventional analysis approach allows the actual information from the data to inform and to help form categories rather than approaching the data with preconceived categories from prior literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). As there is a paucity of literature examining the implementation of a CAI within a law-enforcement context, this approach is appropriate.

Firstly, the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author and transcribed interviews were imported into NVivo™, a computer software program that is designed for qualitative data analysis. NVivo™ was utilized as this software provides a visually-accessible format that indicates where codes are evident, thus aiding the researchers in the analysis. Secondly, the transcripts were read by the first author in a single session and global themes were identified. Upon completion, a more exhaustive analysis was conducted wherein smaller segments of each transcript were descriptively coded. These codes were subsequently reduced to form logical themes that accurately represented the key messaging from the data in a process called winnowing (Wolcott, 1990). The newly developed themes form dynamic coding manuals which are then used to conduct within- and cross-case analyses. Conducting both within-case and cross-case analysis allows researchers to examine each case in-depth but also to identify any shared themes across the participants (Ayres et al., 2003). As Ayres and colleagues argue, “neither across-case nor within-case approaches alone enable the researcher to interpret an experience both through its parts and as a whole, such that readers can recognize individual experience in a generalizable way” (Ayres et al., 2003, p.873). The final step in the data analysis was to establish inter-coder agreement by having a second graduate researcher independently code 20% of the interviews, which is a commonly used standard to ensure reliability in qualitative research (Syed & Nelson, 2015). The percentage agreement rate obtained in the present study was 88%. Any discrepancies in coding were reconciled through discussion. After the interview, member checking was conducted to confirm the researchers’

interpretation of participants' responses and to verify understanding as well as reduce researcher bias. Detailed summaries of the interview were provided to the interviewee and they were asked to confirm, negate, or adjust the researcher's understanding. All participants actively engaged in the member checking process.

Results

As the findings from the cross-case analysis represent commonalities across participants and may be considered to carry additional weighting and be of shared importance, only cross-case findings are reported here. The salient themes in responses shared across participants have been organized into four main subject areas: 1) Police stress and coping mechanisms within the workplace; 2) Experiences of the canine-assisted intervention; 3) The role of the therapy dogs; and 4) The potential of CAIs within law-enforcement.

Subject Area 1: Police Stress and Coping

Participants' reports of stress were mixed. When asked to spend a few minutes reflecting on their stress level over the past 30 days, four of the participants identified that their stress was *high, or higher than usual*, however, three (37.5%) stated that their stress was *low-moderate*. In addition, three (37.5%) admitted that their stress levels, even over the past 30 days, had been *variable* or erratic, with one describing their stress as a "rollercoaster" (Participant 2).

Despite not being asked directly about stressors during the interview, all participants mentioned at least one source of stress when asked to describe stress their stress levels over the past 30 days. The most common stressor, and indeed the most common response to the question as a whole, was to identify a source of *organizational stress* (87.5%) including deadlines, heavy workloads and shortage of resources. One participant described organizational stressors as the "biggest source of stress" (Participant 2), another felt "overwhelmed by it all" (Participant 5) and one even described organizational stressors as a "life-sucker" (Participant 4). Across all participants, 39 stressors were identified which were categorized as *organizational* (48.7%), *operational* (e.g., negative interactions with the public, domestic violence cases; 28.2%), and *personal* (e.g., passing of a family member, home renovations; 23.1%).

The most prevalent themes that emerged when participants were asked how stress affects them were *irritability* (75%), reduced quality of quantity of *sleep* (62.5%), and that their mood was *affected* (37.5%). To cope with this stress, participants identified *exercise* such as using the gym or going for a walk (87.5%) and gaining or changing their *perspective* such as focusing on their goals or changing the approach to a task (75%). In addition, more than half of participants (67.5%) also identified having *breaks* as a way to cope including taking some time to be alone, taking time off from work, or getting up and having a break from a specific task.

Participants' views of where the responsibility laid for fostering well-being were variable, with 50% claiming it was *personal*, 50% claiming it was *collective*. In addition, 25% of participants felt that responsibility also fell onto the shoulders of the *RCMP* and that the organization should be putting energy and resources into ensuring that employees have the necessary tools and resources to improve their well-being. Interviewees (37.5%) also explicitly mentioned that their detachment was actively trying to improve wellness within the workplace.

The most prevalent responses for resources that participants utilized were *Psychologists/Medical Professionals* (87.5%), and *Other Resources* including Chaplains, the wellness committee, and online resources (87.5%). *Fitness/Gym*, *Employee Assistance Program*, *Peer-to-Peer Support Program*, *Events* such as detachment-led appreciation events, and *Social/Human contact* were also notable, with 62.5% of participants including each one of those categories when discussing the resources available to them as members. Over half of the participants (62.5%) also mentioned attending the *B.A.R.K. program* as a resource they utilize to relieve their stress.

The most common barriers to seeking well-being programs or initiatives included *other barriers*, such as being too senior, negative self-attitudes, and not recognizing the need (87.5%) and *stigma* either perceived or actual, and either self-imposed or imposed by others (62.5%). Other notable responses included *accessibility* (50%), *trust* (50%), and *lack of time* (37.5%).

Subject Area 2: Experiences of the CAI program

Participants were motivated to attend the program due to their *love of animals* (75%), *their prior knowledge or experience of CAIs* or canine-induced stress-relief (50%), or *other reasons* (50%) including curiosity and wanting to show support for the management team who brought the initiative into the detachment.

In order to delve deeper into the participants' experiences of the program, they were asked to describe what, if any, impact the program had on them. The most prevalent themes included that the program served as a *break* (87.5%) including that the CAI gave them a break from work or that the program helped them to recharge, refresh, or clear their mind. One participant even described the program as "a welcome relief" (Participant 5). Another common response from participants was that the program was *enjoyable* (75%). All participants stated that they had received *benefits* from attending the program, namely that it was *stress-relieving* (75%), that it helped them to *change perspectives* (75%), and that it *improved their mood* (50%). Specifically, participants stated that the program "lowers any existing stress or pressure you might have" (Participant 3; *stress-relieving*), "provides me with a better sense of reality" (Participant 4; *changed perspectives*), and that "you can feel that it has a positive impact on your mood" (Participant 7; *improved mood*). In addition, 25% of participants also felt that the program had helped to *improve the workplace climate*, citing more positive conversations with colleagues and improved faith in management's desire to improve well-being of colleagues, illustrated by the following participant's insight:

What I also really liked about it, and what I got from it, was that I felt like our senior management was doing something, you know actionable, that was a gesture of caring about their people [...] I believe it just shifts culture a little bit for us and, and I think it restores some people's faith in their management, that they care (Participant 2).

Three of the participants also explicitly drew attention to their view of the CAI being positive in contrast to the negative work environment in which it is situated (subsequently coded as *B.A.R.K. -work contrast*). One participant said "when you're coming from a negative, it's such a big positive to be in the presence of something that seems to want you there, and enjoys you [being] there" (Participant 4). Another added "B.A.R.K. is a positive experience to talk about and to dwell on as opposed to the regular norm of what we deal with on a regular basis which is 99.9% negative" (Participant 6).

Delving deeper into the aspects of the program that foster the beneficial outcomes, participants reported *physically touching the dogs* (75%), *dog characteristics* (such as the dogs being cute, loving or affectionate; 62.5%), or the dogs' ability to be *non-judgmental or unconditionally accepting* (37.5%). To this end, one participant stated that they felt that the therapy dogs had "innate sense of accepting you where you are, and for who you are, [and] you don't have to pretend" (Participant 5). In addition to unpacking the beneficial outcomes, participants were asked to reflect on how long the benefits lasted for them. Responses to this were variable in duration (i.e., 50 % reported less than a day; 37.5 % reported more than a day) and often depending on what the participants would face in the remainder of their working day. Three participants also noted that thinking or talking about the session later on in the day or week brought some of the feelings back (*relived experiences impactful*). For instance, one participant said "you get another little boost from [thinking about B.A.R.K.] because you're remembering the feelings that it brought, and how you felt, [and] you were able to cope with the stress, just by thinking about it from when it happened before!" (Participant 5).

Subject Area 3: The Role of Therapy Dogs in CAIs

Three-quarters of the participants indicated that the therapy dogs' role was to be *social* including seeking attention, coming to greet participants, or "establishing the first contact" (Participant 3). Over half of the participants (67.5%) cited responses that were categorized as *other role* including "to be the centerpiece of the program" (Participant 3) and "to provide support" (Participant 8). The dogs' temperament was also a notable component to their role, with 50% of participants stating that the dogs' role was to be calm including Participant 6 who said that the role of the dog "is to remain nice and calm, and keep it a stress-free environment".

When discussing whether interventions similar to these would be as effective without the dogs, or with a replacement animal, participants overall were undecided. Half of participants felt that other animals would be possible (although often stated stipulations based on behavior or temperament), whereas the other half felt that other animals would not be as effective. When elaborating on their responses, 62.5% explicitly stated that *dogs were effective in the program due to their traits or characteristics* citing their reputation for being unconditionally loving, their disposition, or their unlikeliness to reject attention from a human. Participant 2 stated that "I think dogs have this reputation for being unconditionally loving [...] there's something about the way that they communicate with their eyes, their expressions on their faces and I think they're very affectionate".

Subject Area 4: The Potential of CAIs within Law-Enforcement

Participants demonstrated overwhelming support for having a CAI within their detachment. All participants felt that the program had a place within their workplace and stated that they would continue to attend sessions. Participants included a variety of reasons for why the program had a place within the detachment including: "because it's a work environment that can be stressful and I think it's a positive, proactive thing" (Participant 6) and because of the impact on both individual well-being and the detachment climate, as is evidenced in the following quote:

I think it helps to break down some of the stigma around mental health, it gives people an opportunity to do something themselves that assists their mental health, and it also generates conversation too amongst employees that, just due to geography of the building, they may not normally connect with (Participant 4).

The majority of participants (75%) explicitly endorsed the program and included testimonies such as “It’s a positive part of a work day that not everybody gets to have” (Participant 2) and “I love them [B.A.R.K. sessions]. It’s just a nice time away from my work and it’s just a good-feeling time” (Participant 6). All but one of the participants (87.5%) stated that they intended to continue attending the program because they had gained a benefit, such as: “I can’t change that I’m on a ten-hour shift, but I can at least make it as enjoyable as I can and taking 10 minutes to take a break and rub a dog’s belly helps me” (Participant 1) and “I will continue to attend due to the fact of what they’ve given me back, they bring a calmness and just a different way of being” (Participant 8)

Discussion

The present study was a follow-up exploratory study to an initial investigation that examined the effects of a CAI on law-enforcement personnel’s self-reports of stress. The aim of this study was to explore, in-depth, the perceptions and experiences of law-enforcement personnel who participated in a stress-reduction initiative that saw therapy dogs and their handlers visit an urban RCMP detachment as part of a well-being program. Our findings serve to elucidate the experiences and insights of eight participants as they shared their thoughts on stress and the role of therapy dogs in supporting well-being.

Situating our findings within the broader context of law-enforcement stress reduction, we see the insights of our participants corroborate previous descriptions of law-enforcement as a profession in which organizational stress arising from problematic scheduling (i.e., night shifts), variable shift schedules, burdensome workloads, and discrimination within the workplace, serve to collectively compromise employee well-being (Gershon et al., 2009; Terpstra & Schaap, 2013; White & Robinson, 2014). When asked to describe the toll of this stress, consistent with prior research, participants described heightened irritability, disrupted sleep, and diminished mood. As such, compromised well-being positions employees poorly to perform their work responsibilities, certainly with regard to serving the public and interacting with members of the public who, are themselves, often stressed.

We also see that exercise is a commonly reported coping mechanism and that members often report psychologists, medical doctors, and extended medical care as resources provided to them by the RCMP. These findings further corroborate existing literature (Cairney et al., 2014; Deb et al., 2008; Naz et al., 2014) and emphasize the importance of detachments providing opportunities for members to improve their well-being and cope with stress through exercise, medical coverage, and psychological services. It should be noted that these findings must be interpreted with caution, however, as although members are aware of many resources available to them, it remains unclear if they make use of these resources. There is a stark difference between being able to identify an available resource and utilizing these resources and finding them beneficial to their well-being.

The present study found that stigma and trust were the most notable barriers to making use of well-being resources. Stigma surrounding mental health is a well-documented barrier for seeking help, both within the general population and within law-enforcement (Lauber & Rossler, 2007; Lucia & Halloran, 2019) and this study further emphasizes the need for initiatives to reduce help-seeking stigma within a law-enforcement context. In addition, trust, specifically the fear of broken confidentiality, emerged as another notable barrier for seeking resources. This is in alignment with other studies within

law-enforcement which have found that distrust for mental health professionals who do not work within law-enforcement and distrust in the confidentiality of the available resources are significant barriers to seeking help (Bryan & Morrow, 2011; Fox et al., 2012; Lucia & Halloran, 2019). The findings of the present study further strengthen the notion that law-enforcement personnel face trust concerns in their ability to seek well-being resources. The conclusions of the present study, and previous literature, should be taken into consideration by management personnel within law-enforcement settings. Building trust and reducing concerns over confidentiality should be a priority for law-enforcement agencies as this may help to improve the use of well-being resources and reduce the impact occupational stress has on the individual members and their ability to serve the public.

Accessibility concerns were also a notable barrier, as identified by half of the participants. There is a paucity of literature that addresses the issue of accessibility which, in the present study, encompassed a multitude of concerns working unusual hours outside of typical office hours, resources having a lack of capacity, being out on the road and away from resources, needing a referral from a medical professional, and not having rank-appropriate resources for more senior personnel. Future studies should explore further the accessibility barriers to ascertain resources that would address these concerns.

Examination of the salient themes that emerged when participants were asked for their views on the CAI introduced within their detachment, participants shared that the CAI program was stress relieving or had a calming effect. This is in alignment with prior research examining the impact of CAIs both within a detachment setting and in other contexts (Binfet & Passmore, 2016; Binfet et al., 2020; Barker et al., 2016; Crossman & Kazdin, 2015; Pendry & Vandagriff, 2019). Specifically, the findings from this study further corroborate the findings from emerging research on CAIs in law-enforcement conducted by Binfet and colleagues (2020). The aforementioned study found a significant reduction in pre-to-post-test self-reports of stress of members attending a within-detachment CAI. It follows that participants interviewed in this follow-up study would identify a stress-relieving benefit from attending the program having reported lower levels of stress upon leaving the session.

Three-quarters of the participants reported that the CAI has helped them to change their perspective, including feeling more positive, resilient, or having a different motivation having attended a session. McCullough and colleagues (2016) postulate that “because pets, including dogs generally give individuals feelings of positivity, it can help to improve individuals’ moods and reduce stress” (p.4), however, to date, research has yet to examine participants’ self-perceived positivity in terms of their outlook. Further, more research is warranted to examine the potential for CAIs to boost positivity as an outcome in visitors. In addition, there is a dearth of literature examining the effect of CAIs and therapy dogs on self-perceived resiliency. CAIs have been combined with resilience training workshops (Kjellstrand Hartwig, 2017), although the effect of the therapy dog alone on resilience has not been examined specifically. Finally, the notion that participants identified the CAI as helping them to change perspective is a notable finding as it links into participants’ coping mechanisms. Three quarters of participants identified gaining perspective as one of the ways they cope with stress. It is possible that one of the reasons that participants viewed the program as beneficial and successful was because the program assisted them with one of their pre-existing coping mechanisms.

Participants also identified that the program was enjoyable to attend. One possible explanation is that attending a CAI provides a novel way to improve their well-being and have a break from work and work-related stressors. The concept of a CAI being enjoyable has been found in other studies with different clientele including children (Harris & Binfet, 2020) and in patients with aphasia (Macaulay, 2006). CAIs provide a novel and enjoyable modality through which participants' well-being may be enhanced. This is noteworthy within the context of law-enforcement where members are known to report a number barriers for seeking help. A well-being resource that is deemed to be enjoyable is likely to be utilized more than other, more formalized opportunities.

Further, participants shared that a CAI is a nonthreatening and accessible program that serves to reduce the stigma around help-seeking. This is especially important as law-enforcement personnel report numerous barriers to seeking well-being resources and tend to under-utilize available resources (Blum, 2000; Bryan & Morrow, 2011; Downs & Eisenberg, 2012; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; White et al., 2016). Relatedly, at the core, participants revealed that the therapy dogs played a key role within the CAI and their view was that dogs needed to be concomitantly social (i.e., outgoing) yet calm. This informs our understanding of temperament testing of therapy dogs and their training. It further informs the nature of interactions between visitors to sessions and handlers and suggests that at the outset of a session, the handler can encourage the dog to enthusiastically greet new visitors after which the handler would cue the dog to assume a more placid (i.e., calm) position for the remainder of the interaction.

The temperament and behavior of therapy dogs within individual sessions likely fosters or hinders the extent to which visitors to sessions perceive a connection between themselves and the therapy dog or a human-animal bond. As argued by Hill and colleagues (2020, p. 729), "The human-animal bond (HAB) has been found to contribute to positive characteristics offered in social support relationships, such as unconditional acceptance, love, stability, and a non-judgmental allegiance (Cobb, 1976; Collis & McNicholas, 1988; Hirschman, 1994; Levinson, 1969)." With regards to the findings of our study, the bond established between visitors to sessions and individual therapy dogs, especially for visitors who made frequent use of the within-detachment CAI, the human-animal bond can "provide a buffering effect to adversity" (Hill et al., 2020, p. 729). Repositioning our findings within the framework of the human-animal bond informs how programs and individual sessions ought to be structured – there must be a sufficiently low ratio of dog-to-visitors to allow interactions to cultivate such a bond. The strength of this bond, in turn, may facilitate well-being benefits for visitors such as the reduction of stress.

Finally, the present study sought to establish whether members perceived the CAI to have a place within the unique environment of a police detachment. Participants were overwhelmingly positive in their responses, both endorsing the program in general and stating that they would continue to attend in the future. Participants reported finding the program beneficial for stress reduction and improving their mood, amongst others. This aligns with the wealth of literature in the field that has established that CAIs can elicit well-being outcomes in visitors. In addition, the participants' testimonies demonstrate that there is an appetite for innovative, accessible, and enjoyable CAIs within the unique, high-stress context of a detachment. It is hoped that this will help to inspire other detachments to seek out CAIs to introduce as a well-being initiative within their workplace.

Limitations

Despite best intentions, this study is not without limitations. In this study, we captured the experiences of eight participants who participated in a CAI integrated into their workplace. It should also be noted that participants in this study were all obtained from a single, urban detachment in western Canada and self-selected for participation. The lived experiences of these RCMP members may not reflect the lived experiences of members from other detachments, such as those in rural areas or in other locations.

Data was also collected through interviews alone. It would have been beneficial to have used triangulation to gather more information. Triangulation can be achieved in a number of ways (Denzin, 2017). It may have been beneficial to have collected other information, such as feedback in individual sessions over time; measures of sleep quality, irritability, and other reported effects of stress; or reports from colleagues and/or family members.

Implications

There are several notable implications arising from the findings of this study. First, through this research we were able to gain insights into the views and experiences of female law-enforcement personnel. The literature in law enforcement is saturated with studies wherein participants were predominantly male, including many of the studies discussed in the literature review of this paper. Gershon et al. (2002) for example conducted a study wherein 98% of the participants were male and the findings incorporated the views of only two female participants. These studies, although informative, are dominated by the experiences of the male member. The sample from the current study was 75% female and 25% male. This allowed for an exploration into the experiences of female RCMP members. In addition, this study sample was largely representative of the population who make use of the B.A.R.K. program. The present study aimed to build upon the knowledge obtained in an earlier, quantitative study wherein a CAI was introduced within an urban RCMP detachment (Binfet et al., 2020).

This study also has high ecological validity, defined as “the extent to which the environment experienced by the subject in a scientific investigation has the properties it is supposed or assumed to have by the investigator” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p.516). The study sought to explore participants’ experiences of an existing CAI within their detachment, a real-world, applied setting. The findings reflect strong ecological validity because the interviews were based on an existing CAI that occurs throughout the year and not artificially created for the purpose of the study. This program is also held within the RCMP detachment during a normal working day – it is integrated into the ebb and flow of this complex work environment.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of a CAI within the context of law-enforcement which, despite the increasing popularity of CAIs, remains an under-utilized well-being resource. This, combined with the established need of law-enforcement personnel to reduce stress and the current concern over police stress and mental health demonstrates that this research is both worthy of exploration and timely. Furthermore, the researcher embedded quotations from the transcripts throughout the results section to allow for the participants’ voice to be reflected and to substantiate findings. The present study also represents an important contribution to the literature as this study seeks to explore, for the first time, the lived experiences of law-enforcement personnel who participated in a CAI.

As the field of HAI advances, that task of researchers is not to simply find out if an intervention worked but to also uncover the circumstances within which interventions are situated and to explore the views of the participants asked to engage in interventions. As Fournier (2019, p. vii) posits, “There is very little study of just how humans and animals interact and which interactions with or features of the animal are therapeutic.” As evidenced through the responses of participants in this study, therapy dogs played a key role in reducing barriers to accessing a well-being initiative introduced within the workplace and informed the broader research community’s understanding of the role therapy dogs play in eliciting well-being outcomes in visitors to sessions. The responses of participants 4 and 6 summarize these sentiments in their descriptions:

We’ve seen more people doing it and I’ve been surprised by some of the people who have attended the program – I think in some ways that’s helped to draw others in as well, those that wouldn’t normally [seek resources]. I think the ability to open people’s minds to a new idea is a positive thing, and the program helps to do that (Participant 4).

[The dogs] are a huge component to the program. It’s their calm presence and that relaxed attitude that draws you in and it’s a comforting thing. Just scratching a dog’s ear or petting a dog’s head gives them so much enjoyment that it comes right back to you (Participant 6).

Conclusion

The findings of the present study corroborate previous descriptions of law-enforcement as a profession in which organizational stress is a significant source of stress for members and serves to compromise employee well-being (Gershon et al., 2009; Terpstra & Schaap, 2013; White & Robinson, 2014). When asked to describe the toll of this stress, consistent with prior research, participants described heightened irritability, disrupted sleep, and diminished mood. As such, compromised well-being positions employees poorly to perform their work responsibilities, certainly with regard to serving the public and interacting with members of the public who, are themselves, often stressed. Participants provided an insight into how they cope with workplace stress, including getting exercise or perspective, and taking breaks from work. Further, participants identified a variety of resources made available to them (including Psychologists and Medical services, exercise rooms, and peer-support programs) but also noted numerous barriers to making use of these (including stigma, trust, and accessibility) which are consistent with prior literature (Bryan & Morrow, 2011; Fox et al., 2012; Lauber & Rössler, 2007; Lucia and Halloran, 2019).

The present study demonstrated that RCMP members’ perceptions of a CAI integrated within their workplace was an appealing and nonthreatening way to reduce their stress and enhance their well-being. In addition, members demonstrated overwhelming support for the program in general, appreciated management’s efforts to integrate well-being within their routine workday experience, and felt strongly that CAIs have a place within the detachment setting. Participants also revealed that therapy dogs require nuanced skills to facilitate interactions and that the dogs played a key role within the CAI. It is hoped that the findings from the present study will encourage first-responder agencies and research organizations to explore the integration of CAIs more widely to foster well-being and reduce workplace stress.

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Appendix Semi-structured Interview Guide

The primary purpose of the individual interviews is to explore RCMP constables' perceptions of stress within the workplace. The interviews will be semi-structured. That is, the specific questions asked will depend upon the responses of each participant.

**Probes generated during the interview may be used to delve more deeply into the topic shared by participants.*

Category	Guiding Questions	Probes*	Justification
Levels of stress	As you are aware, this is a study about stress in RCMP members. Let me first begin by asking you to reflect over the past 30 days, and describe your stress level?	To clarify what you've said to me, could I describe you as low/medium/ high stress?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence has suggested that police officers experience high-medium levels of stress (Bano & Talib, 2017). This question will seek to explore this from a qualitative perspective. A 30-day period is used for the reflection on stress because this is deemed a sufficient length of time to take into account any events that are still influencing current stress (Cohen et al., 1983).
Perceptions of the effects of stress	Thank you for describing to me your stress level, I'm curious now to hear how you think stress affects you?	What else can you say about that? Tell me more.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This question seeks to gather details as to the physiological and psychological effects of stress on RCMP. This is asked because researchers have suggested that there are physiological and psychological effects to officers' well-being when they are stressed (Bano & Talib, 2017; Gershon et al., 2009; Terpstra & Schaap, 2013).
Coping mechanisms	In general, when you experience stress, do you do anything about it? When we're talking about workplace stress, whose responsibility is it to reduce stress? The precinct/organization, or the individual?	If so: Tell me about that? What makes you say that? Can you tell me more?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These questions aim to establish what RCMP members are/are not doing to reduce their stress. They also aim to explore whether officers take it upon themselves to reduce their stress, or if they are relying on organizational support.

Category	Guiding Questions	Probes*	Justification
Sources of support	<p>Many are concerned about member stress, describe for me what well-being resources are available to you?</p> <p>You have just described these opportunities; would you describe yourself as a low/med/high user of these opportunities?</p> <p>We've established that there are stress-reduction opportunities available to employees. What would you say are barriers that prevent you from making use of these?</p>	<p>If so: can you tell me about these?</p> <p>If they are using them: what is it about B.A.R.K. program that you find particularly valuable?</p> <p>Tell me more about your frequency of use?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These questions aim to establish the barriers to seeking stress-reduction support. • This is asked because research has suggested that there are reasons why officers do not seek programs to reduce their stress (e.g. Karaffa & Koch, 2016).
Impact of the sessions	<p>Participation in this study required you to have made use of a B.A.R.K. session here at the detachment. Would you describe yourself as a low/med/high user of the program?</p> <p>Why did you make use of the B.A.R.K. program?</p> <p>Did the B.A.R.K. sessions have any impact on you?</p> <p>You have described an impact of the B.A.R.K. session, how do you think this works?</p> <p>If you had to describe how this program works to someone else outside of the precinct, how would you describe the session?</p>	<p>Tell me more.</p> <p>What was it about this that made you feel that way?</p> <p>Why do you think the program impacted you in that way?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These questions aim to explore the motivations for attending and what, if any, impact the CAI program had on members. • This is asked because research has established that this program was successful in reducing pre-to-post self-reports of stress (Binfet et al., 2020, 2020). Research has not explored whether there were any other perceived benefits to having attended.
Role of the dogs	<p>How would you describe the role of the dogs in this program?</p> <p>What do they do exactly?</p>	<p>Tell me more.</p> <p>If so... How?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research has established the efficacy of CAIs within a variety of contexts (Binfet et al., 2018; Binfet & Passmore, 2016; Hoffman et al., 2009; Lang et al., 2010), however little is known about what aspect of the program fosters the beneficial effects.

Category	Guiding Questions	Probes*	Justification
The potential of CAIs within law-enforcement	Do you think you will continue to attend B.A.R.K. sessions in the future? Do you think that canine-based interventions have a place in the detachment setting?	Why/Why not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This is asked because research has established that this program was successful in reducing pre-to-post self-reports of stress (Binfet et al., 2020, 2020).• As there is still very little research in this field, this question sought to establish whether participants would endorse the use of CAIs within their detachment.
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	Do you have any comments or anything else you would like to tell me?		
