

Carrying the Weight of Trauma Home: Secondary Traumatic Stress and Family Relationships among Probation Officers in Nairobi County, Kenya

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100701134>

Received: 06 August 2026; Accepted: 11 August 2026; Published: 22 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Background: Probation officers are regularly exposed to traumatic narratives, violent cases, and distressed clients, placing them at risk of secondary traumatic stress (STS). Such occupational stress may extend beyond the workplace and affect communication, emotional availability, and role functioning within families. **Aim:** This study examined the relationship between secondary traumatic stress and family relationships among probation officers in Nairobi County, Kenya. **Methods:** A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed among 108 probation officers across eight Probation and Aftercare Service stations in Nairobi County. Census sampling was used, and data were collected using a structured questionnaire incorporating the 17-item Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale and an adapted 33-item Family Assessment Device. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation, and multiple regression analysis using SPSS. **Results:** Secondary traumatic stress was moderate overall ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.98$), while family relationships had an overall mean of 2.35 ($SD = 0.95$). STS demonstrated strong negative correlations with communication ($r = -.834$, $p < .001$), emotional availability ($r = -.785$, $p < .001$), and overall family relationships ($r = -.849$, $p < .001$), while its relationship with role functioning was moderate and negative ($r = -.409$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis showed that STS significantly predicted family relationships ($B = -.429$, $p < .001$), with the model explaining 72.5% of variance. **Conclusion:** Higher secondary traumatic stress was associated with poorer family relationship functioning among probation officers.

Keywords: secondary traumatic stress, family relationships, probation officers, occupational trauma, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Secondary traumatic stress (STS) has become an important occupational concern among professionals who repeatedly encounter the traumatic experiences of other people. Unlike direct trauma exposure, STS develops through indirect exposure to traumatic material, particularly through sustained empathic engagement with individuals who have experienced violence, abuse, loss, or other distressing events. Its manifestations, including intrusive thoughts, avoidance, hyper-arousal, emotional fatigue, irritability, and emotional withdrawal, can extend beyond the workplace and influence interpersonal functioning. This is particularly important for probation officers, whose work involves continuous interaction with offenders, victims, families, and individuals affected by crime, violence, substance use, and other forms of adversity. Evidence indicates that probation and parole officers experience STS at levels comparable with other trauma-exposed helping professionals, with occupational risks including heavy caseloads, repeated exposure to emotionally demanding case material, and inadequate supervisory support (Casas et al., 2022; Roberts, 2021). The implications of STS may therefore extend beyond occupational performance to the family environment, where officers are expected to maintain communication, provide emotional support, and fulfil household and parenting responsibilities.

The potential spill-over of STS into family relationships is particularly significant because symptoms such as irritability, emotional numbing, avoidance, and withdrawal can interfere with the quality of interpersonal interactions. Family relationships depend substantially on effective communication, emotional availability, and the ability of members to perform expected roles. When occupational trauma reduces an individual's emotional capacity or availability, the consequences may be experienced by spouses, children, and other household

members. Perry-Jenkins and Gerstel (2020) demonstrate that emotionally demanding employment can affect family functioning through reduced emotional resources, disrupted care giving schedules, and difficulties balancing work and household responsibilities. Similarly, Bachem et al. (2021) reported that approximately 35% of their sample of social workers exhibited moderate STS symptoms and that these symptoms were accompanied by marital tension, parenting difficulties, irritability, withdrawal, and reduced responsiveness to children's needs. These findings suggest that STS is not exclusively an individual psychological problem but may have relational consequences within the family.

Empirical evidence increasingly supports this work-to-family spill-over perspective. In a systematic review of probation and parole officers and related trauma-exposed professionals, Casas et al. (2022) identified recurring patterns of poor communication, reduced emotional availability, irritability, and disruption of parenting roles among professionals experiencing occupational trauma and stress. Eryalçın and Eryalçın (2025) similarly reported a moderate negative association between STS and marital wellbeing among public safety workers; a one-unit increase in STS was associated with an estimated 0.30-point reduction in marital wellness. Participants reporting higher STS also described emotional withdrawal, irritability, and reduced intimacy. Such evidence indicates that increasing exposure to secondary trauma may be accompanied by deterioration in the quality of intimate and family relationships.

Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa provides further support for this relationship while highlighting the importance of context. Towriss et al. (2020) found that moderate to high trauma-related stress was associated with increased marital conflict, emotional withdrawal, disrupted parenting, and difficulties with communication and responsiveness. Mashego et al. (2023) similarly linked trauma exposure among correctional personnel with marital strain, family conflict, and difficulties maintaining parenting responsibilities. Mabaso and Holtzhausen (2017) found that occupational fatigue and avoidance coping among police officers and nurses were associated with emotional withdrawal, poor communication, and reduced engagement in family activities. These findings are particularly relevant to probation officers because their work, like that of correctional and other justice professionals, involves sustained exposure to distressing human experiences and demands emotional engagement with vulnerable populations.

Studies from East Africa also suggest that sustained exposure to traumatic material may influence family functioning. Mutuyimana and Maercker (2023), studying trauma-care providers working with survivors of the Rwandan genocide, found that professionals experiencing moderate to high STS displayed emotional distancing at home, reduced responsiveness to family concerns, and withdrawal from intimate relationships. In Ethiopia, Tamir et al. (2024) reported that 40% of caregivers in trauma-exposed settings experienced moderate to high STS, with associated difficulties including reduced parental monitoring, emotional withdrawal, and inconsistent disciplinary practices. Kabunga et al. (2024) likewise linked continued exposure to patients' suffering with trauma symptoms and emotional fatigue, which could reduce emotional engagement in family routines. Although these studies were conducted among healthcare and trauma-care professionals rather than probation officers, they demonstrate a consistent pattern in which occupational exposure to others' trauma may have consequences for family interaction.

The Kenyan context provides additional reasons to examine this relationship. Justice and correctional personnel in Kenya operate in environments characterized by demanding caseloads and repeated exposure to difficult and traumatic cases. Ndeti et al. (2020) reported that approximately 38% of frontline service providers, including mental health professionals, social workers, and correctional personnel, experienced moderate to severe STS, with emotional exhaustion, detachment, and sleep disturbance among the prominent symptoms. Their qualitative findings further indicated that work-related trauma could affect family relationships through irritability, withdrawal, and diminished emotional availability. Irungu et al. (2024) similarly found that 40% of correctional and law-enforcement personnel exceeded the mild STS threshold, with chronic emotional strain associated with irritability, emotional withdrawal, and interpersonal tension within families. More recently, Chelagat (2025) reported that approximately one in four justice employees reached clinical thresholds for STS, with emotional fatigue and social withdrawal prominent among the reported symptoms. However, probation officers were not included in that study, limiting the applicability of its findings to probation services.

Evidence specifically concerning probation officers in Nairobi is even more limited. Tarichia (2019), in a study involving 45 probation officers in Nairobi, identified communication difficulties and emotional distance within officers' families and reported reliance on family and peer support in the context of limited formal assistance. However, the study did not directly examine whether these family difficulties were associated with STS, nor did it employ standardized STS measures. This represents an important limitation because evidence of family difficulties among probation officers alone does not establish whether secondary traumatic stress is related to those difficulties. Consequently, the relationship between objectively measured STS symptoms and family relationships among probation officers remains insufficiently understood in the Kenyan context.

The relationship can be understood through Family Systems Theory, which conceptualizes the family as an interconnected system in which the experiences and behaviours of one member can influence the functioning of the entire family unit. From this perspective, psychological difficulties experienced by a probation officer do not necessarily remain confined to the individual but may affect patterns of interaction among spouses, children, and other family members (Mawji, 2024). STS symptoms such as avoidance, hyper-arousal, irritability, and emotional withdrawal may consequently alter communication, reduce emotional availability, and interfere with expected family roles. The theory therefore provides a useful framework for examining STS as a potential influence on family functioning rather than treating it solely as an occupational or individual psychological outcome.

Despite growing international evidence, an important empirical gap remains. Existing studies have predominantly examined social workers, healthcare providers, police officers, correctional personnel, first responders, and other trauma-exposed professionals, with relatively little attention given to probation officers. Moreover, many studies have examined STS or family difficulties separately rather than directly testing the relationship between the two constructs. In Kenya, available evidence demonstrates occupational stress and STS among justice and related professionals, but there is limited instrument-based evidence linking STS to specific dimensions of family functioning. The Nairobi context is particularly important because probation officers work within a complex urban environment characterized by high service demands and substantial exposure to diverse social and criminal justice problems. Yet, the extent to which STS is associated with communication, emotional availability, and role functioning among these officers remains unclear.

This study therefore examined the relationship between secondary traumatic stress and family relationships among probation officers in Nairobi County, Kenya. Secondary traumatic stress was conceptualized through the dimensions of intrusion, avoidance, and hyper-arousal, while family relationships were considered in terms of communication, emotional availability, and role functioning. By directly examining the association between these constructs, the study sought to extend existing evidence on occupational trauma beyond individual psychological outcomes and provide context-specific evidence on how secondary traumatic stress may relate to the functioning of probation officers' families.

METHODS

Study Design and Setting

The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design to examine the relationship between secondary traumatic stress (STS) and family relationships among probation officers in Nairobi County, Kenya. The design was appropriate because it enabled the measurement of STS and family relationship characteristics at a single point in time and permitted statistical examination of the association between the two constructs. The study was conducted across eight probation stations operated by the Probation and Aftercare Service (PACS) in Nairobi County: Makadara, Kibera, Dagoretti, Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA), Milimani High Court, Milimani Chief Magistrate Court, Mathari Liaison Office, and Nairobi Probation Hostel. Nairobi provides an important setting for examining this relationship because probation officers operate within a highly urbanized environment and routinely undertake offender supervision, victim support, and preparation of social inquiry reports, activities that may involve repeated exposure to traumatic and emotionally demanding narratives.

Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised 108 probation officers stationed within Nairobi County. Because the population was relatively small and geographically accessible, census sampling was employed, allowing all eligible probation officers to be included rather than selecting a subset through probability sampling. This approach minimized sampling error and enabled the study to capture the experiences of the entire accessible probation-officer population in the county. Participants were eligible if they were currently working as probation officers in Nairobi County and had served for at least six months. The six-month requirement was intended to ensure adequate occupational exposure to probation-related duties and experiences relevant to secondary traumatic stress. Officers who were on extended leave, secondment, maternity or paternity leave, prolonged absence, or who had served for less than six months were excluded. The qualitative key informants included in the broader thesis were not part of the present analysis because this paper focuses exclusively on the quantitative relationship between STS and family relationships.

Measures

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising standardized measures of secondary traumatic stress and family relationships. Secondary traumatic stress was assessed using the Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale (STSS) developed by Bride (2007). The STSS consists of 17 items assessing symptoms corresponding to the three domains of intrusion, avoidance, and hyper-arousal. These dimensions capture the principal trauma-related reactions that may arise following indirect exposure to the traumatic experiences of others. The scale was selected because probation officers routinely interact with individuals whose cases may involve violence, abuse, victimization, and other traumatic experiences.

Family relationships were assessed using an adapted version of the Family Assessment Device (FAD) developed by Epstein, Baldwin, and Bishop (1983). The adapted instrument comprised 33 items relevant to three dimensions examined in the present study: communication, emotional availability, and role functioning. These domains were selected because they capture key aspects of family interaction that may be affected when occupational stress or trauma-related symptoms extend into the home environment. Items were scored according to the response options provided in the adapted instrument, with negatively worded items appropriately reverse-scored where applicable, such that higher scores reflected poorer or greater difficulties in the respective family functioning dimension.

The instrument was reviewed and piloted for clarity, contextual appropriateness, and internal consistency before the main data collection. The pilot study was conducted among 12 officers and a station head at Limuru Probation Station in Kiambu County, which shared relevant characteristics with the study population but was outside the study area. Expert review was also undertaken to strengthen content and contextual validity and to ensure that the wording and content of the adapted items were appropriate for the Kenyan probation-officer context.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients of 0.70 or higher considered acceptable for the study measures. In the current study, the adapted FAD demonstrated acceptable to excellent internal consistency across the three dimensions. Cronbach's alpha was 0.72 for communication, 0.89 for emotional availability, and 0.92 for role functioning, while the overall 33-item instrument yielded an alpha coefficient of 0.83. These findings indicate that the items within the respective dimensions demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency in the present sample. Previous research has also reported acceptable to strong internal consistency for the FAD domains, with coefficients generally ranging from approximately 0.72 to 0.92. The reliability coefficients obtained in the current study therefore provide empirical support for the internal consistency of the adapted FAD in the Kenyan probation-officer context.

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained the required institutional and ethical approvals, research authorization, and permission to access PACS stations in Nairobi County. Approval was obtained from the relevant university, while a research permit was obtained from the National Commission for Science,

Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Permission was also sought from PACS headquarters, followed by engagement with individual station managers to facilitate access and minimize disruption to routine probation services.

Eligible probation officers were approached through their respective stations and invited to participate voluntarily. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were provided with information concerning the purpose and procedures of the study and were informed of their rights as research participants. Written informed consent was obtained before participation. The structured questionnaire was self-administered either in person or through an online format, depending on logistical feasibility and participant preference. Participants were given adequate time to complete the questionnaire in a private setting to promote confidentiality and reduce potential response bias. Questionnaires were administered in English, while participants could use Kiswahili when responding to sensitive family-related issues.

Data Analysis

Completed questionnaires were examined for accuracy, completeness, and consistency before analysis. The data were coded and entered into SPSS for statistical analysis. Incomplete records were excluded where necessary, while appropriate procedures were applied to address minor missing information. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize participant characteristics and the distribution of STS and family relationship measures. To address the primary objective of determining the relationship between secondary traumatic stress and family relationships, the Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficient was used to establish the direction and strength of the association between the two variables. The analysis considered STS as the explanatory construct, represented by intrusion, avoidance, and hyper-arousal, and family relationships as the outcome construct represented by communication, emotional availability, and role functioning. Where applicable, multiple regression analysis was used to assess the extent to which STS accounted for variation in family relationship outcomes while considering contextual characteristics including years of service, gender, and caseload. Statistical findings were presented using appropriate coefficients, significance values, and effect estimates. The interpretation of statistical significance followed the threshold specified in the study's analytical protocol.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university, and authorization to conduct research was obtained from NACOSTI and PACS. Participants received adequate information about the study and provided written informed consent before participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning identification codes rather than recording participants' names on the research instruments. Electronic research files were password-protected and securely stored, with access restricted to the research process. Given the potentially sensitive nature of questions concerning trauma and family relationships, questionnaires were completed privately and participants were assured that their responses would be used exclusively for research purposes. The researcher also declared no financial conflict of interest. Potential professional familiarity with the probation environment was acknowledged, and standardized instruments, voluntary participation, confidentiality safeguards, and objective statistical procedures were used to minimize potential researcher-related bias.

FINDINGS

Participant Characteristics

The study involved 108 probation officers from eight probation stations in Nairobi County. The participants represented a relatively experienced workforce, with the largest proportion aged 36–40 years (31.5%), followed by those aged 31–35 years (25.9%). More than two-thirds of the respondents were married (69.4%), while 18.5% were single, 8.3% were widowed, and 3.7% were separated/divorced. In terms of family responsibilities, 92.6% of the officers had at least one child, with those having three children constituting the largest group (23.1%). The majority had served for more than five years, with 33.3% reporting 11–15 years of

service and 28.7% reporting 6–10 years. Respondents were distributed across all eight probation stations, with Makadara contributing the largest proportion (24.1%), followed by Kibera (19.4%) and Milimani Chief Magistrate Court (18.5%). Caseloads ranged from 10 to 30 cases, with the largest proportion handling 10–15 cases (26.9%), while 22.2% handled 26–30 cases. Additionally, 54.6% had received trauma-informed practice training compared with 45.4% who had not.

Table 1. Demographic and occupational characteristics of probation officers (N = 108)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age (years)	26–30	12	11.1
	31–35	28	25.9
	36–40	34	31.5
	41–45	18	16.7
	46 and above	16	14.8
Gender	Female	55	50.9
	Male	52	48.1
	Other/Prefer not to say	1	0.9
Marital status	Married	75	69.4
	Single	20	18.5
	Widowed	9	8.3
	Separated/Divorced	4	3.7
Number of children	0	8	7.4
	1	10	9.3
	2	22	20.4
	3	25	23.1
	4	18	16.7
	5	12	11.1
	6	8	7.4
	7	5	4.6
Years of service	1–5	25	23.1
	6–10	31	28.7
	11–15	36	33.3
	16–18	16	14.8
Probation station	JKIA	12	11.1
	Makadara	26	24.1
	Kibera	21	19.4
	Mathari Liaison	6	5.6
	Nairobi Probation Hostel	11	10.2
	Milimani High Court	8	7.4
	Dagoretti	4	3.7
	Milimani Chief Magistrate	20	18.5
Caseload	10–15 cases	29	26.9
	16–20 cases	28	25.9
	21–25 cases	27	25

	26–30 cases	24	22.2
Trauma-informed training	Yes	59	54.6
	No	49	45.4

The demographic and occupational characteristics are important to interpreting the relationship between secondary traumatic stress and family relationships. The high proportion of married officers and those with children indicates that many participants had active family and care giving responsibilities through which occupational stress could potentially spill over into family life. Similarly, the substantial proportion of officers with more than six years of service provides a context of sustained exposure to probation-related demands, while variation in caseloads captures differences in workload that may be relevant to secondary traumatic stress. The relatively balanced representation of male and female officers also provides a broad demographic basis for examining the study variables. These characteristics therefore provide important contextual information for interpreting the subsequent analysis of the relationship between secondary traumatic stress and family relationships, without treating the demographic variables themselves as the primary focus of this paper.

Secondary Traumatic Stress among Probation Officers

Secondary traumatic stress was assessed using three dimensions: intrusion, avoidance, and hyper-arousal. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the three dimensions and the overall STS score.

Table 2. Secondary Traumatic Stress among Probation Officers (N = 108)

STS Dimension	No. of Items	M	SD
Intrusion	5	3.16	0.96
Avoidance	7	3.15	0.99
Hyper-arousal	5	3.26	0.98
Overall Secondary Traumatic Stress	17	3.19	0.98

As shown in Table 2, the overall STS score was $M = 3.19$ ($SD = 0.98$). Hyper-arousal recorded the highest dimension mean ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.98$), followed by intrusion ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.96$) and avoidance ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.99$). At item level, difficulty sleeping because of work-related stress recorded the highest hyper-arousal score ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.99$). Within avoidance, avoiding thoughts about some clients or cases recorded $M = 3.29$ ($SD = 0.99$), while within intrusion, feeling as though clients' trauma was happening to the officer recorded $M = 3.22$ ($SD = 0.90$). These results indicate that all three dimensions were present among the respondents, with hyper-arousal having the highest average score.

Family Relationships among Probation Officers

Family relationships were assessed across communication, emotional availability, and role functioning. The descriptive results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Family Relationship Dimensions among Probation Officers (N = 108)

Family Relationship Dimension	No. of Items	M	SD
Communication	9	2.4	0.96
Emotional availability	13	2.33	0.94
Role functioning	11	2.33	0.94
Overall Family Relationships	33	2.35	0.95

Table 3 shows that the overall family relationship score was $M = 2.35$ ($SD = 0.95$). Communication had the highest mean among the three dimensions ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.96$), while emotional availability and role functioning both recorded $M = 2.33$. Within communication, listening carefully to family members recorded the highest item mean ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.00$). For emotional availability, the highest mean was recorded for the ability to provide emotional comfort to family members ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 0.99$). In role functioning, positively worded items generally had lower scores, whereas items reflecting work–family interference had higher scores before reverse coding. For example, respondents reported that their jobs sometimes affected their performance of family duties ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.93$), interfered with quality family time ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.93$), and made balancing work and family difficult ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.00$).

Relationship between Secondary Traumatic Stress and Family Relationships

Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine the relationship between STS and the three dimensions of family relationships, as well as the overall family relationship score. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Pearson Correlations between Secondary Traumatic Stress and Family Relationship Dimensions (N = 108)

Variables	r	p-value	Interpretation
STS and communication	−0.834	< .001	Strong negative
STS and emotional availability	−0.785	< .001	Strong negative
STS and role functioning	−0.409	< .001	Moderate negative
STS and overall family relationships	−0.849	< .001	Strong negative

The results in Table 4 indicate statistically significant negative relationships between STS and all family relationship dimensions. STS had a strong negative relationship with communication ($r = -0.834$, $p < .001$) and emotional availability ($r = -0.785$, $p < .001$). A moderate negative relationship was observed between STS and role functioning ($r = -0.409$, $p < .001$). The strongest overall relationship was between STS and overall family relationships ($r = -0.849$, $p < .001$). Thus, higher STS scores were associated with lower scores on overall family relationship functioning and each of its measured dimensions.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether STS predicted family relationship scores after accounting for years of service, gender, and caseload. The model summary and regression coefficients are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Predicting Overall Family Relationship Scores (N = 108)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p-value	95% CI
Constant	4.037	0.113	35.843	< .001	[3.814, 4.261]
Secondary traumatic stress	−0.429	0.026	−16.339	< .001	[−0.481, −0.377]
Years of service	0.001	0.004	0.148	0.883	[−0.007, 0.008]
Gender	0.044	0.038	1.159	0.249	[−0.031, 0.119]
Caseload	−0.002	0.003	−0.701	0.485	[−0.009, 0.004]

Model statistics: $R = .851$; $R^2 = .725$; adjusted $R^2 = .714$; $F(4, 103) = 67.92$, $p < .001$.

As shown in Table 5, the regression model was statistically significant, $F = 67.92$, $p < .001$, and explained 72.5% of the variance in family relationship scores ($R^2 = .725$). After controlling for years of service, gender, and caseload, STS remained a statistically significant negative predictor of family relationships ($B = -.429$, $SE = .026$, $t = -16.339$, $p < .001$). The 95% confidence interval for STS (-0.481 to -0.377) did not include zero. This indicates that a one-unit increase in STS was associated with an estimated 0.429-unit decrease in the family relationship score, holding the other predictors constant. Years of service ($p = .883$), gender ($p = .249$), and caseload ($p = .485$) were not statistically significant predictors in the model. Taken together, the results show that STS was consistently and negatively associated with family relationship functioning. The relationship was evident across communication, emotional availability, and role functioning, with the strongest association observed for overall family relationships.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The current study examined the relationship between secondary traumatic stress (STS) and family relationships among probation officers in Nairobi County. The findings demonstrate that the psychological demands associated with probation work extend beyond the workplace and may influence officers' emotional availability, communication, and performance of family roles. The study found considerable exposure to traumatic and emotionally demanding cases, with an overall trauma-exposure mean of 3.63 ($SD = 1.02$), while the overall STS score was 3.19 ($SD = 0.98$). Family relationships recorded an overall mean of 2.35 ($SD = 0.95$), with communication, emotional availability, and role functioning indicating areas of difficulty. Most importantly, STS demonstrated strong and statistically significant negative relationships with communication, emotional availability, and overall family relationships, while its relationship with role functioning was moderate and negative. These findings are important within the Kenyan probation context, where officers perform demanding responsibilities involving offenders, victims, families, and court-related processes, creating repeated opportunities for exposure to distressing experiences and emotionally demanding interactions (Ndeti et al., 2020).

The relatively high level of trauma exposure is understandable given the nature of probation work. Officers reported frequent involvement with violent offences, sexual offences, abuse, crisis situations, victims and survivors of violent crime, and offenders with histories of criminal violence. This suggests that exposure to traumatic material is embedded within routine professional responsibilities rather than being an occasional occupational event. Figley's (1995) Secondary Traumatic Stress Theory provides an appropriate explanation, as professionals who repeatedly engage empathically with individuals who have experienced trauma may themselves develop trauma-related responses despite not being direct victims. Secondary traumatisation can therefore emerge through sustained professional contact with people who have experienced traumatic events, particularly where such exposure is repeated and emotionally demanding (Figley, 1995; Klareć et al., 2013). The findings are also consistent with concerns regarding trauma exposure among frontline service providers in Kenya, where occupational stress and secondary trauma have been identified as issues requiring appropriate organisational and family support (Ndeti et al., 2020).

The overall STS score of 3.19 indicates that officers experienced symptoms across intrusion, avoidance, and hyper-arousal. Hyper-arousal recorded the highest dimension mean ($M = 3.26$), followed by intrusion ($M = 3.16$) and avoidance ($M = 3.15$). The relatively elevated hyper-arousal score suggests reactions such as irritability, heightened alertness, sleep difficulties, and difficulty concentrating. Intrusion indicates that distressing occupational experiences may remain psychologically present after officers leave the workplace, while avoidance may reflect attempts to distance themselves from distressing cases or associated emotions. These findings correspond with the conceptualisation of secondary traumatic stress as trauma-related responses resulting from indirect exposure to another person's traumatic experiences (Figley, 1995). Klareć et al. (2013) similarly describe secondary traumatisation as a process through which professionals exposed to traumatic material may experience psychological consequences despite not being the original victims. Evans (2020b) further found that interventions targeting psychological regulation and occupational stress can contribute to reductions in STS among social workers, suggesting that secondary traumatic stress should not simply be regarded as an unavoidable consequence of helping professions. Organisational mechanisms for psychological support and stress management may therefore reduce its impact. This is particularly relevant to probation

services, where officers may repeatedly encounter traumatic cases without structured opportunities to process their emotional demands. As Kumar (2019) notes, research findings should be systematically linked to the context in which data are collected; thus, probation work should be understood not only as a criminal justice function but also as an occupation involving sustained emotional labour.

The study further established that family relationship functioning was generally constrained. Communication recorded a mean of 2.40 (SD = 0.96), while emotional availability and role functioning each recorded a mean of 2.33, resulting in an overall family relationship mean of 2.35 (SD = 0.95). These findings suggest difficulties in maintaining effective communication, emotional engagement, and family responsibilities alongside demanding professional obligations. The adapted Family Assessment Device provides an appropriate framework for examining these dimensions because the original instrument developed by Epstein, Baldwin, and Bishop (1983) assesses important aspects of family functioning and captures how family members perceive their interaction and functioning (Epstein et al., 1983).

The findings concerning family relationships can also be understood through Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978), which conceptualises the family as an interconnected emotional system. From this perspective, psychological strain experienced by one member may influence interaction patterns within the wider family system. A probation officer who returns home emotionally exhausted, preoccupied with distressing cases, irritable, or psychologically withdrawn may have fewer emotional resources available for communication, affection, parenting, and other family responsibilities. Occupational stress may consequently spill over from work into family life. Evans (2020a) similarly reported that occupational stress among law enforcement personnel can have implications for family well-being, while Mabaso and Holtzhausen (2017) associated emotional exhaustion among police officers and other frontline professionals with challenges extending into family life. The demanding responsibilities of probation officers—including supervising offenders, preparing reports, responding to crises, and managing administrative demands—may therefore consume emotional and cognitive resources that would otherwise be available for family interactions.

The strongest finding was the relationship between STS and family relationships. Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated strong negative associations between STS and communication ($r = -.834, p < .001$), emotional availability ($r = -.785, p < .001$), and overall family relationships ($r = -.849, p < .001$). STS also had a moderate negative relationship with role functioning ($r = -.409, p < .001$). These findings indicate that officers reporting higher levels of STS tended to report poorer functioning across the major dimensions of family relationships. The particularly strong association with overall family relationships suggests that the consequences of STS extend across several aspects of family functioning rather than being restricted to a single relational domain.

These findings are consistent with Eryalçın and Eryalçın (2025), who identified a relationship between secondary traumatic stress and marital satisfaction among public safety professionals. Although marital satisfaction is not identical to the broader construct of family relationships examined in the present study, the findings are relevant because both indicate potential interpersonal consequences of occupational exposure to traumatic material. Evans (2020a) similarly demonstrates the relevance of occupational stress to family well-being among law enforcement personnel.

The regression findings provide further evidence of the importance of STS. The model explained 72.5% of the variance in family relationships ($R^2 = .725$; adjusted $R^2 = .714$; $F = 67.92, p < .001$). STS was a statistically significant negative predictor of family relationships ($B = -.429, p < .001$), whereas years of service, gender, and caseload were not statistically significant predictors when STS was included in the model. Thus, STS was more strongly associated with family relationship outcomes than the selected demographic and occupational variables. For every one-unit increase in STS, family relationship scores decreased by approximately 0.429 units, holding the other predictors constant.

The findings can therefore be understood through the combined application of Figley's Secondary Traumatic Stress Theory and Bowen's Family Systems Theory. Figley's framework explains how repeated exposure to clients' traumatic experiences may generate trauma-related responses among probation officers (Figley, 1995), while Bowen's perspective explains how these psychological experiences may influence the wider family

system (Bowen, 1978). An officer experiencing intrusive thoughts, emotional withdrawal, irritability, sleep difficulties, or heightened alertness may have fewer psychological resources for family communication and emotional engagement. The stress may consequently move from the occupational environment into the family system.

Importantly, family relationships may also function as sources of support rather than merely outcomes of occupational stress. Nabunya and Ssewamala (2021) found that family support can contribute to resilience among social workers, highlighting the potential protective role of supportive family environments. Officers who experience open communication, emotional understanding, and supportive family relationships may therefore have greater resources for coping with occupational stress. Conversely, persistent STS may weaken these relationships and reduce an important source of emotional support.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that probation officers in Nairobi County experienced substantial exposure to traumatic and emotionally demanding work situations, with secondary traumatic stress presenting at moderate levels across intrusion, avoidance, and hyper-arousal symptoms. Family relationships were also affected, particularly in communication, emotional availability, and role functioning. Most importantly, the findings demonstrated a strong and statistically significant negative relationship between secondary traumatic stress and overall family relationships ($r = -.849$, $p < .001$). Secondary traumatic stress also significantly predicted family relationship outcomes, with the regression model explaining 72.5% of the variance in family relationships. In contrast, years of service, gender, and caseload did not significantly predict family relationship outcomes when secondary traumatic stress was considered. These findings indicate that higher levels of secondary traumatic stress were associated with poorer family relationship functioning among probation officers, particularly through reduced communication, emotional availability, and capacity to fulfil family roles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that the Probation and Aftercare Service (PACS) strengthen structured psychological support and staff wellness programmes for probation officers, with particular attention to the prevention and management of secondary traumatic stress. Regular screening for secondary traumatic stress symptoms, access to professional counselling, peer-support programmes, and periodic psychological debriefing should be incorporated into staff welfare initiatives. Given the strong negative relationship between secondary traumatic stress and family relationships, workplace wellness programmes should also include practical interventions that help officers manage the spill-over of work-related stress into their family lives. Training on trauma-informed practice, emotional regulation, healthy coping, and work–family boundary management should be provided regularly. PACS should also consider workload management and supportive supervision to reduce prolonged exposure to emotionally demanding cases. At the institutional level, officers should be encouraged to access available psychological and welfare services without fear of stigma or professional consequences. Finally, future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method designs to examine how secondary traumatic stress develops and relates to family functioning over time, while comparative studies across Kenyan counties could improve the generalisability of the findings. Further research should also examine whether organisational support, trauma-informed training, coping strategies, supportive supervision, and family support moderate or buffer the relationship between secondary traumatic stress and family functioning. Intervention studies should assess the effectiveness of specific psychological and organisational interventions in reducing secondary traumatic stress and improving family relationship functioning among probation officers.

LIMITATIONS

The study had several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design limited the ability to establish causal relationships between secondary traumatic stress and family relationships, since data were collected at one point in time. Second, the study relied on self-reported questionnaire data, which may have been influenced by recall difficulties, social desirability, or participants' reluctance to disclose personal experiences concerning psychological stress and family functioning. Third, the study was conducted among probation officers in

Nairobi County only, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to probation officers working in other counties or in different organisational contexts. Finally, although the study used a census approach, the relatively small population of 108 officers may have limited the statistical power and broader applicability of the findings.

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