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The Cost of Justice: Vicarious Trauma and the Legal System's Duty of Care to Jurors

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Abstract

Jurors play a critical role in the administration of justice, yet their compulsory exposure to graphic and distressing evidence during criminal trials is often overlooked in discussions of mental health and legal reform. This paper investigates the psychological impact of jury service in trials involving murder, domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse, where laypeople are required to view autopsy photographs, listen to emergency calls, and assess disturbing testimonies without any formal training or mandatory psychological support. While vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and moral injury are recognised in research on law enforcement, social work, and healthcare, there is limited acknowledgement that no professional group consistently receives adequate trauma prevention or recovery support. This gap is particularly concerning for jurors, who are laypeople compelled to participate in the justice process. Drawing on legal case studies, psychiatric research, and international precedent, this paper argues that the justice system imposes an invisible emotional burden on jurors while offering limited, inconsistent, and mostly reactive support. Although applicable to many countries, particular attention is given to Australian jurisdictions, where counselling services are sparse and optional, and where juror confidentiality laws restrict therapeutic disclosures. This research also considers the legal and ethical implications of exposing untrained civilians to traumatic material and explores whether the state could, or should, bear legal liability for post-trial psychological harm. Ultimately, this paper calls for the introduction of clearly defined trauma-informed jury procedures, including pre-trial psychological briefings, structured debriefings, and systemic reform, to acknowledge juror well-being as a necessary component of fair and ethical justice.

Keywords: juror trauma; vicarious trauma; secondary traumatic stress; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); moral injury; jury duty; criminal trials; legal ethics; trauma-informed practice; psychological impact of the justice system



Academic Editors: Liam J. Leonard and Natacha Harding

Received: 15 July 2025

Revised: 5 September 2025

Accepted: 8 September 2025

Published: 22 September 2025

Citation: Croucher, John S., and Rebecca Ward. 2025. The Cost of Justice: Vicarious Trauma and the Legal System's Duty of Care to Jurors. *Laws* 14: 69. <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws14050069>

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1. The Overlooked Mental Health Cost of Jury Duty

In criminal trials involving graphic violence, sexual abuse, or child exploitation, jurors are routinely required to engage with evidence that is emotionally confronting and psychologically disturbing. Unlike trained professionals in policing, law, or psychology, who may have some access to occupational support, albeit inconsistently and often with stigma attached, jurors enter the courtroom without preparation, prior exposure, or access to structured mental health care. Despite being a core pillar of the justice system, they are

largely unprotected from the psychological consequences of their service. Crucially, the issue is not that other justice professionals are well supported—it is that no group receives adequate support, and jurors, as laypeople compelled to participate, are the least prepared and least protected.

Jurors have been shown to experience symptoms such as intrusive memories, sleep disturbance, heightened anxiety, and other trauma-related responses following exposure to evidence such as autopsy photographs, emergency call recordings, or witness testimonies involving child sexual abuse (Linares and Miles-Thorpe 2025; Lonergan et al. 2016). PTSD is defined by the American Psychiatric Association as a psychiatric disorder that can occur following direct or indirect exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence, and includes symptoms such as flashbacks, intrusive memories, and avoidance behaviours. Secondary traumatic stress refers to PTSD-like symptoms arising from indirect exposure to trauma, while vicarious trauma involves cumulative cognitive and emotional changes from repeated exposure to others' suffering. These symptoms in jurors can include insomnia, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, emotional numbness, and heightened anxiety. In extreme cases, jurors have reported suicidal ideation or long-term psychological distress following service in traumatic trials (Independent 2023; Urban Islandz 2018).

The justice system's failure to adequately acknowledge or address these risks is particularly evident in Australia. While the states of New South Wales and Victoria have introduced limited post-trial counselling services, such as three to six optional sessions after the conclusion of the trial, these programmes are entirely reactive and do not provide support during the trial process itself (NSW Sheriff's Office 2023; Juries Victoria 2022). There is no standardised psychological briefing before jurors are exposed to traumatic material, no formalised debriefing once the trial ends, and no long-term monitoring of mental health outcomes. Jurors are legally restricted from disclosing deliberation content to family members or mental health professionals, even when doing so might aid psychological recovery (Jury Act 1977 (NSW Legislation 2024), as consolidated to 2024, continues to govern the administration of juries in New South Wales (NSW Legislation 2024)). These constraints create a paradox: jurors are compelled to witness intense human suffering but are discouraged, and in some cases prohibited, from speaking about its impact. This enforced legal silence can exacerbate distress and isolate individuals at the moment they most require support.

The ethical implications of this suppression are significant. Jurors are not volunteers; they are compelled by law to participate, raising serious questions about the state's duty of care. If the state mandates psychological exposure to traumatic material as part of civic duty, should it also ensure appropriate safeguards are in place? Recent legal decisions, such as *Kozarov v State of Victoria* (2022), where the High Court held that a public employer was liable for psychiatric injury caused by repeated exposure to traumatic evidence, suggest that a similar duty of care could apply to jurors under certain conditions. This paper contends that the current jury system is not trauma-informed, a term defined in Section 8, and that the absence of preventative and responsive measures places jurors at risk of preventable harm. The sections that follow examine documented juror experiences, the psychological science behind vicarious trauma and related conditions, and international legal precedents to support the case for reform.

2. The Graphic Reality of Criminal Evidence

Jurors in criminal trials are often required to examine some of the most confronting evidence the justice system has to offer. These materials include forensic photographs of deceased victims, audio recordings of emergency calls, autopsy reports, crime scene images, and witness testimonies involving domestic violence, child sexual abuse, and homicide.

For most jurors, ordinary civilians with no prior exposure to violent trauma, this experience can be psychologically overwhelming.

In a 2017 North Carolina murder trial, a female juror physically vomited in the courtroom after being shown graphic crime scene photographs of Jason Corbett, who died from blunt force trauma inflicted with a baseball bat and a concrete paving stone. The medical examiner presented 13 photos of Corbett's injuries, including one of the top of his skull. According to courtroom reports, the juror began retching during the testimony and required a trash bin before being escorted out of the room ([Associated Press 2017](#)).

In the United States, the 1995 O.J. Simpson trial became one of the most high-profile examples of prolonged juror distress. The jury, sequestered for an extraordinary 265 days, was exposed to graphic crime scene evidence, including photographs of Nicole Brown Simpson's nearly decapitated body and Ron Goldman's multiple stab wounds, some consistent with defensive resistance. Over the course of the trial, several jurors reported physical and psychological symptoms such as insomnia, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. According to [Toobin \(1996\)](#), tensions among jurors escalated to the point that thirteen of the eighteen staged a protest by refusing to enter the courtroom, demanding relief from the extreme conditions of sequestration.

Jurors in cases involving institutional child abuse, particularly those concerning faith-based organisations, have reported symptoms consistent with trauma after being exposed to sustained narratives of abuse. These cases often include the reading of victim impact statements, internal medical reports, and testimonies describing the deliberate relocation of known offenders within church hierarchies. While the [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse \(2017\)](#) provided a formal investigation into these harms, the psychological well-being of jurors in related criminal trials received little to no attention. The cumulative impact of hearing repeated disclosures of abuse, betrayal by authority figures, and systemic inaction presents a clear risk of moral injury when jurors feel that what they are required to hear and decide conflicts with deeply held values or beliefs ([Litz et al. 2009](#)).

In the UK, researchers at Manchester Metropolitan University conducted a study on jurors exposed to distressing trial content, including graphic photographic evidence and victim testimony. The study found that jurors were almost four times more likely than the general population to meet the threshold for PTSD symptoms. These included intrusive memories, hyperarousal, emotional numbing, and avoidance behaviours ([Independent 2023](#)). The research highlighted the long-term psychological consequences of exposing civilians to traumatic material without sufficient psychological preparation or follow-up care.

Audio evidence also plays a major role in juror trauma. Unlike photographs, which can be looked away from, audio requires deep attentiveness. In domestic violence cases, jurors may be asked to listen to emergency calls where the victim is being actively assaulted or to recorded threats from perpetrators. In homicide cases, they may hear the victim's final moments, often accompanied by screams, pleas for help, or silence. These recordings, raw, unfiltered, and highly emotive, are often cited by jurors as among the most difficult parts of a trial ([Lonergan et al. 2016](#)).

The emotional intensity of this material is compounded by the requirement that jurors remain neutral and unemotional during proceedings. Judges typically instruct jurors not to let feelings interfere with objectivity, yet the human response to trauma is not something that can be turned off at will. A juror cannot witness a child's post-mortem injuries, hear a mother sob through an emergency call, or examine a rape kit photograph without some form of emotional imprint. Unlike trained professionals who may have access to

supervision or coping strategies, though not always consistently or without stigma, jurors are left to process these images and sounds alone.

This dynamic is particularly dangerous because of the illusion that courtroom evidence is “just part of the process”. The repeated use of clinical language, procedural formalities, and legal framing can desensitise the environment to the human content of the trial. Phrases like “blunt force trauma to the cranium”, “penetrative injuries”, or “loss of blood volume” may obscure the human brutality they represent. Jurors, sitting through hours of such testimony, must decode these words into decisions of guilt, often while being internally overwhelmed by what they are witnessing.

There is no standardised warning system in place to alert jurors before graphic evidence is shown. In some jurisdictions, judges may offer cursory statements such as, “The following material may be confronting,” but no psychological preparation is mandated. The absence of trauma-informed practices in this context is in stark contrast to some fields such as medicine, counselling, or law enforcement, where elements of exposure management or peer support may be offered, but are neither universal nor always effective (Bride 2007; Pearlman and Saakvitne 1995).

The evidence is clear: jurors are being asked to view, hear, and absorb traumatic content at a level that is psychologically hazardous, yet they are offered little protection, no training, and minimal support. This section has illustrated that graphic evidence in criminal trials is not only common but often extreme, with well-documented impacts on those who are exposed to it. The next section will explore the psychological science behind these impacts, particularly the concepts of vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress, and explain how these phenomena manifest in individuals without prior trauma exposure.

3. Vicarious Trauma—A Known Phenomenon, Ignored in Juries

While the justice system acknowledges the need to protect vulnerable witnesses and child complainants from undue psychological harm, it remains largely indifferent to the mental health consequences experienced by jurors exposed to the same evidence. Yet the psychological effects of repeated or intense exposure to traumatic material are well-established in the clinical literature under the terms vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and moral injury, phenomena frequently observed among professionals in trauma-exposed fields such as social work, counselling, policing, and healthcare.

3.1. Defining the Phenomena

Vicarious trauma refers to the cumulative, transformative effect of empathetic engagement with trauma material on individuals who are not themselves direct victims (McCann and Pearlman 1990). It can manifest through changes in worldview, disruptions in emotional regulation, intrusive imagery, and a deterioration of trust or safety. Secondary traumatic stress (STS) presents with symptoms that resemble post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—for example, intrusive thoughts, avoidance, hyperarousal, and emotional numbing—arising from indirect exposure to trauma. By contrast, vicarious trauma refers to the gradual, cumulative cognitive and meaning-level changes that can follow repeated empathetic engagement with others’ trauma (e.g., shifts in trust, safety, and worldview). In juror contexts, STS may appear more acutely (e.g., following exposure to graphic evidence), whereas vicarious trauma reflects longer-run alterations in beliefs and assumptions (Day and McLachlan 2024; Bride 2007; McCann and Pearlman 1990).

Though these terms were originally applied to mental health professionals, they are now recognised in broader occupational contexts, including professions that involve contact with traumatic narratives, such as emergency service personnel, journalists, and legal professionals (Figley 1995; Molnar et al. 2017). What remains overlooked

is the application of these concepts to jurors, a population uniquely compelled by law to engage with traumatic evidence but provided with no preparation, containment, or systemic support.

3.2. *The Psychological Risk to Jurors*

Unlike therapists or police officers, jurors typically do not have access to peer support, debriefing practices, or any form of structured preparation to mitigate exposure. They are expected to remain stoic, emotionally neutral, and rational while being exposed to material that would be considered psychologically hazardous in any other setting.

Lonergan et al. (2016), in their review of juror trauma, reported that homicide and sexual assault trials were especially strong predictors of post-trial psychological distress. Jurors described experiencing intrusive thoughts, difficulty sleeping, and heightened emotional responses months after the conclusion of their service. The review highlighted that jurors exposed to photographic or audio evidence depicting severe violence or abuse were especially susceptible to trauma-related symptoms.

3.3. *The Neurobiology of Vicarious Exposure*

From a neurobiological standpoint, exposure to traumatic imagery, even in the absence of direct physical threat, activates brain regions associated with fear, stress, and memory formation. The amygdala, which governs the fear response, becomes hyperactive, while the hippocampus, responsible for processing memory, struggles to contextualise the traumatic input (van der Kolk 2014). While Van der Kolk's work is grounded in developmental trauma, juror exposure more commonly results in acute emotional and psychological responses rather than the neurobiological changes associated with chronic childhood adversity. For untrained individuals, this can result in symptoms such as flashbacks, dissociation, and mood dysregulation.

In the case of jurors, this process is intensified by the cognitive dissonance required to participate in a trial while being denied the emotional tools to process its content. Jurors are told to be impartial, detached, and logical, but their brains and bodies may be in a state of emotional overwhelm. Unlike trauma professionals who can process exposure through supervision, structured debriefing, or peer discussion, albeit with varying quality and accessibility, jurors absorb intense material in silence and are expected to "return to normal" immediately after the verdict.

3.4. *Moral Injury and Justice*

The concept of moral injury, traditionally associated with military contexts, is increasingly relevant in legal settings. Moral injury arises when a person is required to act, or refrain from acting, in ways that conflict with their deeply held values, rather than simply witnessing upsetting events (Litz et al. 2009). In the context of jury duty, this may occur if a juror feels pressured during deliberations to reach a verdict they believe is unjust, or if they perceive that the legal process has failed to protect a vulnerable party.

Jurors who sit through trials involving institutional abuse, particularly child sexual assault within trusted organisations like religious institutions or care facilities, may experience significant distress not just from the content of the evidence but from the perceived betrayal by systems that were meant to protect. In such cases, jurors may leave the courtroom with a deepened mistrust of authority, disillusionment with the legal process, or a lingering sense of helplessness. These feelings may be compounded if they are legally restricted from discussing their experiences, particularly when therapy is required to make sense of what they have seen or heard.

3.5. Professional Recognition, Civilian Denial

Ironically, while trauma-exposed professionals are increasingly recognised as being at risk of vicarious trauma, sometimes with access to mental health services, leave entitlements, or hazard pay, jurors are treated as though they are unaffected. In reality, many professionals face the same under-resourced or inconsistent support landscape that jurors experience, but jurors are further disadvantaged by their lack of training, choice, and occupational protections. This double standard has serious implications. As highlighted in [Lonergan et al. \(2016\)](#), jurors remain one of the least studied and supported groups in the courtroom, despite evidence of significant psychological strain (p. 58).

The justice system relies on the emotional labour of jurors but offers no scaffolding to support that labour. This structural negligence creates a situation where psychological harm is not only possible but predictable, yet remains largely unacknowledged in policy and practice. The next section will examine what happens when jurors do experience psychological harm: what support, if any, is offered, and what the consequences are when that support is inadequate or absent altogether.

4. When Jurors Break

The psychological impact of jury service in traumatic criminal trials is not theoretical. There are well-documented cases of jurors experiencing acute psychological distress, including physical illness, mental health deterioration, suicidal ideation, and, in some cases, complete psychological breakdown. These responses are not uncommon; they are simply unacknowledged by the systems that compel juror participation.

Following the trial, several jurors described symptoms consistent with psychological trauma, including anxiety, depression, dissociation, and long-term difficulty reintegrating into their lives. The experience was so distressing that one juror later stated she would never serve again under any circumstances, describing the sequestration process as “mentally punishing” ([Toobin 1996](#)).

4.1. Post-Trial Suicidal Ideation

In Jamaica, following the high-profile murder trial of dancehall artist Vybz Kartel, a female juror publicly disclosed experiencing suicidal thoughts due to the psychological aftermath of the trial. She cited ongoing panic, fear for her safety, and emotional exhaustion from both the content of the case and the intense public scrutiny. She ultimately fled the country, stating, “I almost killed myself. That case destroyed my life” ([Urban Islandz 2018](#)).

This case highlights an important distinction: psychological damage to jurors is not always caused by the content of the evidence alone. It can also result from the broader environment of intimidation, legal responsibility, and social pressure placed on jurors, particularly in high-profile or politically charged cases.

4.2. Evidence of PTSD Symptoms in Juror Populations

[Lonergan et al. \(2016\)](#) also reported high levels of trauma symptoms among jurors, particularly those exposed to murder trials, sexual assault cases, and crimes involving children. Several participants in their study reported long-term psychological effects, including depression, substance misuse, and relationship breakdowns, directly linked to their experiences during the trial.

4.3. Silence, Shame, and Systemic Neglect

What makes these cases more troubling is that jurors rarely feel they have permission to acknowledge their distress, let alone seek help. Jury secrecy laws, such as Section 68 of the Jury Act 1977 ([NSW Legislation 2024](#)), prohibit the disclosure of jury deliberations, even to

a therapist or support professional, if such disclosure risks revealing the internal dynamics of the jury's decision-making. While these laws are designed to protect the integrity of verdicts, they also deter vulnerable jurors from disclosing the psychological impact of their experience in any detail that might lead to meaningful therapeutic intervention. This legal constraint effectively isolates jurors at the exact moment they may need professional help. As [Loneragan et al. \(2016\)](#) highlight, the unique role of jurors places them in a psychologically vulnerable position, one that is rarely recognised until after symptoms of stress or trauma have already developed (p. 52).

4.4. *The Absence of Accountability*

Unlike victims or trauma-exposed professionals, jurors do not have any formal protection mechanisms in place. There is no compulsory debriefing after difficult trials and no systemic check-ins. In many Australian jurisdictions, the only support available is voluntary counselling after the trial, usually limited to three to six sessions ([NSW Sheriff's Office 2023](#); [Juries Victoria 2022](#)). Jurors are often unaware that this support exists, and few take it up. By the time distress manifests, most have returned to work or family responsibilities, often feeling that they must "move on" despite ongoing symptoms.

The contrast with other trauma-exposed professions is often framed as stark. In reality, while many professions such as policing, paramedicine, and journalism may have access to some form of trauma response training, mental health services, or peer-support frameworks, these are inconsistently applied, often voluntary, and sometimes subject to stigma. Jurors are further disadvantaged because they have no prior exposure, no training, and no ongoing workplace to return to for support.

4.5. *What If a Juror Suicides?*

Juror suicide is not a theoretical concern; it has happened. In 2007, a Victorian man took his own life after serving on what was then the state's longest-running murder trial. His widow later filed a claim alleging that the psychological trauma of his jury service contributed significantly to his death. Media reporting at the time highlighted the case as a tragic and unusual example of juror breakdown ([Butcher 2008](#)). Despite this, to date, no Australian jurisdiction has conducted a formal coronial inquest into juror suicide stemming from trial-related trauma, nor are jurors systematically tracked or offered post-trial mental health support.

The system assumes jurors will cope. In doing so, it assumes no responsibility. The case of the Salt nightclub murders, a violent, high-profile gang-related trial that lasted nine months and included harrowing testimony about stabbing victims and drowning deaths, illustrates the potential consequences. The widow of a juror claimed that the emotional weight of this exposure triggered or worsened her husband's depressive illness, culminating in his death. She sought compensation under the Accident Compensation Act on behalf of herself and their two children. Her initial claim was rejected.

Her lawyer, Andrew Dimsey, described the case as "very tragic and very unusual." From a trauma-informed perspective, it is neither unusual nor unpredictable. Jurors are expected to withstand the same psychological strain as police, lawyers, and medical examiners without any training, support, or debriefing. If a workplace is obligated to safeguard employee mental health, can the state really argue that compulsory jury service carries no such duty of care? The silence around juror trauma is no longer just a gap in policy; it is a looming liability.

This silence is echoed in broader concerns raised by researchers and legal psychologists. Recent literature points to a systemic underestimation of the psychological impact of trial participation. As [Loneragan et al. \(2016\)](#) note, jurors often face graphic and disturbing

evidence without any form of trauma screening, psychological preparation, or aftercare. Their review highlights the invisible burden of vicarious trauma, especially in trials involving violent crime or child abuse. The expectation that ordinary citizens can absorb such material without consequence is both unrealistic and dangerous. While some professions involve psychological training and regular supervision, jurors are effectively dropped into trauma without preparation, guidance, or sustained follow-up.

5. Institutional Betrayal—No Debrief, No Rights

The justice system relies heavily on jurors to perform a mentally and emotionally taxing civic role, yet offers no systematic debriefing, monitoring, or structural protection for their mental health. This omission, despite growing empirical evidence of psychological harm, constitutes a form of institutional betrayal. Defined in trauma psychology, institutional betrayal occurs when an organisation, particularly one a person depends on, fails to prevent or respond supportively to trauma (Smith and Freyd 2013). In the context of jury service, this betrayal is enacted through omission: silence, neglect, and legal obfuscation.

5.1. No Mandatory Debriefing

In most Australian jurisdictions, no mechanism exists to provide a mandatory psychological debriefing for jurors after exposure to distressing evidence. Support, if offered, is typically limited to a small number of optional post-trial counselling sessions, which jurors must self-initiate. In New South Wales, the Juror Support Program offers up to three free counselling sessions (NSW Sheriff's Office 2023). In Victoria, jurors are eligible for up to six telehealth sessions after the conclusion of the trial (Juries Victoria 2022). These programmes, while commendable in principle, remain reactive, undocumented, and insufficiently integrated into the formal trial process.

Crucially, these supports are only activated after the trial concludes. There is no embedded support while the trial is underway, despite the fact that this is precisely when jurors are most exposed to trauma-inducing material such as forensic photos, audio recordings, and detailed witness testimony. The absence of in-trial psychological support places jurors in a uniquely disadvantaged position, compelled to endure trauma without preparation, accompanied support, or structured coping mechanisms.

5.2. Silence Is the System

Adding to this institutional neglect is the deliberate silencing of jurors through secrecy legislation. Under Section 68 of the Jury Act 1977 (NSW Legislation 2024), it is an offence to disclose the content of jury deliberations to anyone, including friends, family, or mental health professionals. While these laws are designed to protect the integrity of the judicial process, they may discourage jurors from seeking help even for the emotional impact of their service, out of fear of breaching confidentiality or attracting legal scrutiny. As noted by juror trauma researcher Loneragan et al. (2016), this silence creates a paradox: "Jurors are simultaneously tasked with making life-altering decisions and discouraged from seeking emotional support for the toll this takes" (p. 408). It is a form of emotional isolation under the guise of civic responsibility.

5.3. No Follow-Up, No Monitoring

Unlike trauma-exposed professionals, such as police officers, paramedics, or social workers, who may have access to some form of mental health assessment or employee assistance programmes, though these are inconsistently available and uptake can be low, jurors are not tracked, monitored, or contacted after trial completion. Once the verdict is delivered and the court discharges them, jurors are treated as having exited the justice system entirely, even though psychological effects may persist for weeks, months, or years.

This “use-and-dismiss” model fails to meet any contemporary psychological standard of duty of care. If a public institution were to expose its employees to similarly distressing material without offering trauma screening, preventative training, or structured aftercare, it would likely be in breach of occupational health and safety obligations. The High Court’s decision in *Kozarov v State of Victoria* (2022) affirmed that public employers can be held liable for psychiatric injury caused by repeated exposure to trauma in the absence of adequate safeguards. While jurors are not classified as employees, they are mandated by the state to perform an emotionally hazardous civic function. The principle of reasonable foreseeability of harm is clearly applicable: the justice system knows, or ought to know, the psychological toll it imposes.

By contrast, some jurisdictions in the United States offer limited post-verdict engagement. While follow-up is neither standardised nor trauma-informed, some courts send “thank you” letters to jurors with optional feedback questionnaires or allow post-trial interviews by attorneys or investigators (Blank 2024). Jurors are also free to discuss the case publicly unless restricted by specific state laws, and some judges speak directly with jurors following the verdict to offer closure. These practices, while informal, at least gesture toward a recognition of the juror’s ongoing psychological presence after discharge.

In Australia, no such engagement exists. Jurors are left entirely on their own, often unaware of the limited counselling available to them. This institutional silence not only compounds trauma but also erodes public trust. By failing to acknowledge the emotional cost of compulsory jury service, the justice system sends a clear message: your service ends when the verdict is read, even if your suffering does not.

5.4. Contrasts with Other Systems

Other systems have begun to acknowledge the psychological burden of traumatic legal processes. For example, in the UK, a 2023 pilot programme introduced free counselling and a 24 h helpline for jurors serving on “trauma trials”, including sexual assault and murder cases (The Times 2023). The initiative was launched following public concern about rising mental health issues among jurors in high-profile criminal cases. By contrast, Australia has yet to implement any national or state-wide mandatory psychological protocol for juror care.

Additionally, military and emergency service institutions have increasingly adopted trauma-informed frameworks that include pre-exposure education, peer debriefing, and long-term mental health resources. Journalists reporting on traumatic content are similarly trained in vicarious trauma awareness, with professional bodies providing psychological safety guidance (Molnar et al. 2017). Jurors exposed to equally distressing material receive no comparable protections, reflecting a systemic blind spot in duty-of-care considerations.

5.5. Psychological Safety as a Legal Imperative

The failure to provide adequate juror support is not only unethical; it may soon become legally unsustainable. As psychological injury becomes more visible and litigated in other sectors, it is reasonable to predict that the legal system will eventually need to respond to juror trauma with a duty-of-care framework. Without this shift, courts risk becoming complicit in the preventable psychological harm of those they compel to serve. The absence of institutional protection creates the risk of secondary injustice: jurors, who may already feel conflicted or disturbed by their exposure to human cruelty, are further harmed by the system’s failure to recognise their suffering. This betrayal compounds trauma and erodes public trust in the legal system’s moral authority.

As Smith and Freyd (2013) note, institutional betrayal magnifies harm by violating the expectation that systems will protect and support those who serve them. Jurors do

not volunteer for trauma; they are drafted into it. When their service is met with silence, neglect, and legal gagging, the betrayal becomes systemic. The next section will explore the legal implications of this neglect, including whether the state could or should be held liable for psychiatric harm sustained by jurors during or after trial.

6. Silenced by Law—The Legal Gag Order on Trauma

One of the most paradoxical and ethically complex elements of jury service in traumatic trials is the way the legal system simultaneously exposes jurors to distressing content and prohibits them from discussing it. This enforced silence, legally mandated and culturally normalised, creates significant barriers to psychological recovery and may worsen the effects of vicarious trauma. Jurors are not simply unsupported; in many jurisdictions, they are structurally silenced.

6.1. Legal Restrictions on Disclosure

In New South Wales and many other Australian jurisdictions, jury secrecy is codified under legislation. Section 68 of the Jury Act 1977 ([NSW Legislation 2024](#)) prohibits jurors from disclosing or discussing the content of jury deliberations. This includes sharing information with friends, family, the media, or even therapists if that information reveals the nature of jury discussions. While the law is intended to preserve the integrity and independence of the jury process, its unintended consequence is a significant inhibition of help-seeking behaviour among jurors experiencing psychological harm.

This restriction becomes especially problematic when jurors attempt to seek psychological support after the trial. As [Lonergan et al. \(2016\)](#) notes, many jurors are unsure what they are allowed to say in therapy. In the absence of clear guidance, they may withhold key details or avoid seeking help altogether, fearing they may be in breach of legal obligations. This legal ambiguity leaves jurors emotionally isolated, with no clear path to safely process the trauma they have experienced.

6.2. The Chilling Effect of Gag Laws

Even when jurors do not intend to disclose deliberation specifics, the fear of breaching confidentiality laws creates a chilling effect. As noted by the [Law Reform Commission of Western Australia \(2010\)](#), jurors often express confusion and anxiety about what aspects of their experience they are permitted to share, particularly when seeking mental health care. The Commission recommended revising legislation to provide clearer protections for jurors who seek therapeutic support, recommendations that, as of 2025, have not been adopted at a national level.

This uncertainty can be particularly damaging for jurors suffering from symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Trauma recovery depends on the ability to make meaning of the experience through narrative, emotional processing, and reflection, processes that often require speaking with others, especially trained clinicians ([van der Kolk 2014](#)). By restricting access to this kind of processing, secrecy laws may inadvertently prolong or intensify psychological distress.

6.3. International Comparisons

By contrast, some jurisdictions have recognised this tension and made efforts to mitigate it. In the United Kingdom, while jury secrecy is similarly enshrined, the 2023 trauma-informed juror support initiative clarified that jurors could speak with counsellors about their emotional responses to trial content, provided they did not disclose internal deliberations ([The Times 2023](#)). This approach strikes a more appropriate balance between protecting deliberative confidentiality and facilitating access to mental health care.

Canada's Criminal Code also prohibits discussing jury deliberations, but a 2018 Senate report recommended amending the law to explicitly allow jurors to disclose deliberation-related trauma in therapeutic contexts ([Senate of Canada 2018](#)). While the legislative change is still pending, there is clear momentum toward recognising jurors' emotional rights alongside procedural safeguards.

6.4. *Ethical Concerns and Human Rights*

The suppression of juror speech in therapeutic settings raises serious ethical and human rights questions. If jurors are compelled to view graphic evidence, including images and narratives of murder, rape, and child abuse, they should also be assured the legal right to access full psychological care without fear of prosecution. Article 12 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* ([United Nations 1966b](#)), to which Australia is a signatory, recognises the right of every person to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Denying jurors access to full psychological support due to secrecy laws arguably places Australia at odds with its international human rights obligations.

6.5. *Trauma-Informed Legal Reform*

There is now a strong case for amending jury legislation to allow for protected therapeutic disclosure, that is, the right of jurors to speak confidentially with registered mental health professionals about the emotional impact of their service, including aspects of deliberation where clinically necessary, without fear of legal repercussions. This could be modelled on legal provisions such as client-lawyer privilege, mandatory reporting exceptions, or protected witness categories already present in criminal and civil law. Such reform would not compromise the finality or integrity of verdicts. Instead, it would safeguard the dignity, health, and autonomy of jurors as human beings, recognising that justice should not come at the cost of individual psychological collapse.

7. Legal and Ethical Liability—Could the State Be Sued?

As evidence accumulates that jury service in traumatic trials can lead to serious psychological harm, a pressing legal question arises: Could the state be held liable for failing to protect jurors from foreseeable psychiatric injury? This question challenges long-standing assumptions about the immunity of legal institutions and the perceived voluntariness of jury service. Increasingly, the answer appears to be yes, under the right conditions.

7.1. *Duty of Care in Tort Law*

Under Australian tort law, a duty of care arises where it is reasonably foreseeable that a person might suffer harm due to the actions or omissions of another and where it is just and reasonable to impose such a duty (*Wyong Shire Council v Shirt* (1980) 146 CLR 40). Jurors who are mandated by law to participate in criminal trials and exposed to traumatic evidence without consent or adequate preparation clearly fall within a class of persons owed a duty of care by the state.

Importantly, the harm in question, vicarious trauma, PTSD, anxiety disorders, or depression, is no longer abstract. As shown in Sections 3 and 4, the psychological risks to jurors are both real and predictable, especially in trials involving graphic evidence. Where harm is foreseeable and safeguards are absent, the legal test for negligence begins to solidify.

7.2. *Kozarov v State of Victoria (2022): A Landmark Case*

The High Court's decision in *Kozarov v State of Victoria* [2022] HCA 12 significantly advanced the legal landscape for psychiatric injury caused by workplace exposure to trauma. In this case, the plaintiff was a solicitor employed by the Office of Public Prosecutions, working in the Specialist Sexual Offences Unit. She developed PTSD and major depressive disorder after repeated exposure to traumatic case material involving child sexual abuse. The Court held that the employer owed a duty of care, breached that duty by failing to rotate her to less distressing work or offer psychological screening, and was thus liable for her psychiatric injury.

The ruling confirmed that exposure to disturbing content alone, even without physical harm, can give rise to liability if the risk is foreseeable and support is absent. Although jurors are not employees, the principle is transferable: both are state-mandated roles, both involve exposure to high-risk material, and both depend on the state to create psychologically safe conditions. As [Scott and Freckelton \(2023\)](#) note, *Kozarov* establishes a meaningful precedent for public sector accountability in cases involving vicarious trauma and psychiatric injury (p. 515).

7.3. *Civilian High-Risk Roles and the Limits of Choice*

While *Kozarov* concerned a legal professional, the underlying principle, that the state must mitigate foreseeable psychological risk, applies equally to jurors. Unlike employees in other trauma-exposed professions, jurors cannot negotiate their conditions, refuse certain tasks, or seek redeployment. This absence of agency heightens the ethical obligation on the state to protect them. As [Lonergan et al. \(2016\)](#) argues, jurors should be recognised as “civilians operating under high-risk institutional conditions,” where systemic negligence, such as failing to provide trauma education or follow-up support, may amount to a breach of human rights obligations under domestic and international law.

7.4. *A Pathway to Litigation?*

A successful claim for psychological injury by a juror would need to satisfy several criteria:

1. Duty of care—Established by the state's control over jury selection and trial conditions.
2. Breach of duty—Proven by showing that no psychological safeguards or supports were in place despite foreseeable risks.
3. Causation—Demonstrated through medical evidence linking jury service to psychiatric harm.
4. Damage—Manifested in diagnosable conditions (e.g., PTSD, anxiety disorders).

Such a case has not yet been brought in Australia, but it may only be a matter of time. Legal commentary increasingly views juror trauma as a “blind spot” in institutional accountability ([Scott and Freckelton 2023](#)). Should a juror commit suicide, self-harm, or suffer long-term psychological damage after exposure to graphic trial content, with no formal preparation, support, or debriefing, it is plausible that a civil claim could be mounted under common law negligence or human rights frameworks.

7.5. *Human Rights Implications*

Beyond tort law, this issue also engages with human rights principles. Article 7 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) prohibits “inhuman or degrading treatment” and has been cited in cases involving psychological harm caused by state negligence ([United Nations 1966a](#)). Similarly, Article 12 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) guarantees access to mental health as part of the right to health. Failure to implement trauma-informed safeguards for jurors arguably breaches both. As [Lonergan et al. \(2016\)](#) observes, “When legal systems compel citizens to

participate in psychologically harmful processes without recourse, they shift the burden of justice onto the very people tasked with delivering it” (p. 56).

7.6. Precedent Without Reform

Despite mounting evidence and legal recognition of vicarious trauma in related domains, Australia has yet to translate these insights into a trauma-informed jury system. No state or territory currently mandates psychological screening, mental health briefings, or post-trial debriefings for jurors. The legal framework assumes resilience and enforces silence, despite clear indications that both assumptions are unsafe. If the state continues to compel laypeople to engage in highly traumatic proceedings without adequate support, it may soon find itself not only ethically but also legally accountable for the damage that results.

8. Toward a Trauma-Informed Jury System

The evidence presented thus far paints a clear picture: jurors in criminal trials are routinely exposed to traumatic material with minimal preparation, inconsistent support, and restricted avenues for recovery. While the justice system has made commendable progress in protecting vulnerable witnesses, especially in sexual assault and child abuse cases, it has failed to extend the same protections to jurors despite their proximity to the same traumatic content.

For the purposes of this paper, a “trauma-informed” jury system refers to a legal process that recognises the prevalence and impact of trauma, actively works to prevent re-traumatisation, and embeds safeguards, both procedural and cultural, that prioritise psychological safety without compromising trial integrity. This approach, widely used in health, social services, and education sectors, is built on principles of safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender responsiveness ([Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\) \(2014\)](#)). Applied to juries, it means anticipating psychological risk, intervening early, and ensuring recovery pathways.

This section argues that Australia’s jury system must adopt a trauma-informed framework, integrated across all stages of service and applied consistently in every jurisdiction, to reduce foreseeable harm. Such a model must be pre-emptive, embedded within jury processes, and universally accessible.

1. Pre-Trial Psychological Briefing

Before exposing jurors to graphic or traumatic content, courts should provide mandatory psychological briefings. These sessions would:

- Explain the nature of the material (e.g., autopsy photographs, victim testimony, emergency call recordings);
- Introduce basic concepts of vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and emotional regulation;
- Provide clear information on available mental health resources;
- Reassure jurors that experiencing distress is a normal human response.

Comparable procedures already exist in the military, emergency services, and disaster response domains, where personnel receive pre-deployment briefings to prepare for distressing material ([Molnar et al. 2017](#)). For jurors, this would require minimal resources yet deliver a significant protective effect.

2. In-Trial Monitoring and Trauma Checkpoints

At present, there are no structured systems to monitor jurors' well-being during the trial process itself. Judges may occasionally allow breaks or observe distress, but this is ad hoc and reliant on visible symptoms. A trauma-informed system would introduce:

- Confidential check-ins with a designated mental health liaison (e.g., once weekly or after key evidence);
- A discreet flagging process for jurors to report emotional overwhelm;
- Flexibility to excuse or rotate jurors in extreme cases of trauma.

This is not unprecedented: in the UK, the Crown Prosecution Service has introduced similar safeguards for support persons, and Canada's 2018 Senate report recommended mental health monitoring for jurors during graphic trials.

3. Post-Trial Debriefing and Support Continuum

Following trials involving traumatic evidence, all jurors should be offered a mandatory debriefing session facilitated by a qualified mental health professional. This session would provide an immediate outlet for emotional processing and serve as a screening point for further intervention.

Additionally, states should provide:

- Automatic access to at least six counselling sessions, renewable as needed;
- A follow-up contact within 30 days to assess well-being;
- Written guidance on mental health rights, confidentiality, and disclosure boundaries.

Currently, jurisdictions such as New South Wales and Victoria offer optional counselling post-trial, but uptake is low and integration into the juror journey is lacking. Normalising debriefing would destigmatise emotional responses and ensure no juror leaves the court unsupported.

4. Protected Therapeutic Disclosure Reform

As outlined in Section 6, secrecy laws deter jurors from seeking help. Legislative reform should allow protected disclosures of deliberation-related distress in therapy by:

- Permitting confidential discussion with registered mental health professionals;
- Providing statutory immunity for such disclosures when made solely for treatment;
- Ensuring clinicians cannot disclose deliberative content unless lawfully compelled.

Canada's 2018 Senate report and the [Law Reform Commission of Western Australia \(2010\)](#) both recommend this reform, which could be enacted without undermining verdict integrity.

5. Trauma Screening and Optional Exemptions

Jury service is a civic duty, but not psychologically neutral. A privacy-preserving screening process at empanelment should allow exemptions without requiring disclosure of personal details. Options could include:

- Self-exemption where a juror anticipates significant distress from exposure to traumatic evidence;
- Confidential discussion with a designated court officer or mental health liaison;
- Optional clinician attestation of current vulnerability (e.g., "unsuitable for high-trauma exposure at this time") without disclosing diagnoses or trauma history.

6. Cultural Change Within the Judiciary

Procedural reform alone is insufficient. Judicial officers, court staff, and lawyers should receive training in:

- The psychological impacts of traumatic trials;
- Recognising signs of juror distress;
- Responding appropriately without undermining trial fairness.

Embedding trauma literacy at all judicial levels will replace the untested assumption of juror resilience with informed, evidence-based care (see Table 1).

Summary of Recommendations

Table 1. Recommendations for embedding trauma literacy across judicial processes.

Reform Area	Recommendation
Pre-trial	Mandatory psychological briefing
In-trial	Weekly check-ins, distress flag system
Post-trial	Mandatory debriefing + structured counselling
Legislative	Protected therapeutic disclosure
Screening	Optional trauma history screening and exemptions
Judicial education	Trauma-informed practice training

The Path Forward

A trauma-informed jury system is not a luxury; it is a legal, ethical, and public health necessity. If the justice system continues to demand that laypeople absorb the most distressing elements of human behaviour without preparation, protection, or a safe avenue for recovery, it is not delivering justice; it is outsourcing trauma. The next and final section will synthesise these findings and ask a fundamental question: if jurors are vital to our justice system, why are they the ones most easily forgotten?

9. The Hidden Cost of Justice

The jury system is often celebrated as a cornerstone of democratic justice. Yet beneath that ideal lies an uncomfortable truth: jurors, ordinary, untrained citizens, are routinely exposed to some of the most disturbing evidence imaginable without adequate warning, psychological preparation, or systemic support. They witness horror. They deliberate in silence. They are thanked for their service and then sent home, often changed forever.

This paper has shown that exposure to graphic trial content, including autopsy photos, emergency call recordings, child abuse testimonies, and crime scene images, can cause genuine psychological harm. Symptoms of vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are not hypothetical risks; they are well-documented, evidence-based realities (Lonergan et al. 2016; Independent 2023). Some jurors vomit in court, while others experience intrusive flashbacks, insomnia, or long-term emotional disconnection. In extreme cases, they contemplate suicide (Urban Islandz 2018).

What makes this damage worse is that it is both foreseeable and preventable. The justice system already understands trauma in other domains. Vulnerable witnesses receive protection. Emergency service workers are debriefed. Legal professionals are offered psychological support. Yet jurors, upon whom verdicts depend, are provided with none of these safeguards.

Compounding this neglect is the enforced secrecy that prevents jurors from seeking therapeutic help without fear of legal reprisal. Section 68 of the Jury Act 1977 (NSW Legislation 2024) and equivalent legislation in other states criminalise the disclosure of jury deliberations. This silences jurors who are already psychologically burdened, turning civic duty into a form of emotional exile. There are no coronial inquests into juror suicides, no longitudinal tracking of mental health outcomes, and no trauma-informed national framework. Australia, like many countries, simply assumes that jurors will cope, an assumption increasingly indefensible on ethical and legal grounds.

The legal precedent set in *Kozarov v State of Victoria* [2022] HCA 12 confirms that institutions can be held liable for psychiatric harm caused by foreseeable and unmanaged

trauma exposure. If jurors are compelled to witness the worst of human behaviour with no protection, the day may come when a court recognises that the state, too, might be at fault.

This essay calls for the urgent implementation of a trauma-informed jury system. Mandatory psychological briefings, in-trial check-ins, post-trial debriefings, access to counselling, and protected therapeutic disclosure are not optional extras; they are structural necessities. Without them, the justice system continues to depend on unacknowledged emotional labour.

Justice must not come at the cost of quiet suffering. If jurors are essential to the legal system, then their well-being is not peripheral; it is foundational. The courtroom does not end at the verdict. For many jurors, the trial continues in their minds and bodies long after the judge says, “You are now discharged.” The question is no longer whether trauma occurs, it is what we are prepared to do about it.

Author Contributions: Writing—original draft, J.S.C. and R.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: The authors express their thanks to The Honourable Michael Kirby AC CMG, whose thoughtful reflections and encouragement shaped the final draft.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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