

# “Man Up and Get to Work”: Assessing How Police Officers Experience and Cope with Occupational Stress

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# Introduction

- ▶ Meet Dr. Pickering!
  - ▶ How/why I began studying the police
    - ▶ Emphasis on officer decision-making
  - ▶ Previous research on officers' decision-making during officer-involved shootings
    - ▶ How this type of incident can impact an officer's mental health
    - ▶ Differences in access to mental health resources (according to participating officers)
- ▶ Today I will share some preliminary findings from a study currently being conducted with one of my graduate students (Jennifer Hernandez-Orellana)
  - ▶ Retention issues in law enforcement → the impact of occupational stress → help-seeking behaviors

# Impact of Occupational Stress

- ▶ Most studies on stress and its effects on police officers focus on two sources of stress (Cerel et al., 2019; Craddock & Telesco, 2021; Morash, et al., 2006):
  - ▶ **Operational stressors**: Stem from demands and duties associated with police work
    - ▶ Ex: Exposure to traumatic incidents
      - ▶ Responding to calls involving the death of children, suicides, car accidents, the loss of a partner in the line of duty, officer-involved shootings, etc. (Novak et al., 2018)
  - ▶ **Occupational stressors**: Relating to issues within the police organization
    - ▶ Ex: Pressure from police administrators, lack of support from supervisors, feeling stagnant within the agency

# Impact of Occupational Stress

- ▶ In addition to studying occupational stressors within police work, it is also imperative to understand how experiencing stress can impact officers
  - ▶ Outcomes can range from fatigue, burnout, anxiety (acute and chronic), depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicide
    - ▶ Over the last few years, more officers in the U.S. have died by suicide than being feloniously killed in the line of duty (BLUE Help, 2023)
- ▶ When police officers do experience mental health issues related to occupational stress, how do they cope?

# Mental Health Concerns & Outcomes

- ▶ Officers could speak to:
  - ▶ Fellow officers
  - ▶ Family & friends
  - ▶ Mental health professionals
- ▶ But it's important to consider the impact of police culture on officer behavior (Reuss-Ianni, 1983; Skolnick, 1966; Westley, 1970)
  - ▶ Emphasis on strength (mental and physical), authoritative demeanor, and working in a male-dominated occupation

# Hiring & Retention Issues in Law Enforcement

- ▶ Law enforcement agencies in the U.S. are currently experiencing a hiring and retention crisis (Police Executive Research Forum, 2019)
  - ▶ Agencies are **struggling to hire** new officers
    - ▶ Changes in how law enforcement is perceived as a profession
    - ▶ Increased media attention on police
    - ▶ More employment options available to those entering the job market
  - ▶ They are also **losing officers** at increasing rates
    - ▶ New(er) officers leaving law enforcement for other career opportunities
    - ▶ More senior officers retiring (e.g., medical retirement or early retirement)
- ▶ These issues can negatively impact whether and how police can effectively do their jobs (e.g., respond to calls for service, reduce crime, etc.)

# Current Study

- ▶ We designed a study to assess whether and how various occupational stressors impact officers' decision to stay in the profession. . .or *consider* leaving. . .or actually leaving
  - ▶ Occupational stressors that are being assessed include:
    - ▶ Shift work
    - ▶ Type of assignment
    - ▶ Impact of media coverage
    - ▶ Relationship with the community
    - ▶ Administration
  - ▶ We also ask participating officers to discuss whether (and how) they believe officers cope with these stressors
    - ▶ Are they likely to seek formal or informal help to cope?

# Current Study

- ▶ To assess issues related to retention in law enforcement, we chose to interview current and former police officers in California's Central Valley
  - ▶ Current officers (as of now) are from a single local law enforcement agency (n=10)
    - ▶ All assigned to patrol
  - ▶ Former officers were recruited through personal contacts (n=5)
    - ▶ Three were in ranked/administrative positions at the time they left law enforcement
- ▶ Interviewing current and former officers allows us to assess:
  - ▶ Whether current officers have considered leaving the occupation and why
  - ▶ Why former officers chose to leave the occupation



# Findings

- ▶ Participating officers agreed that issues like **shift work, special assignments, the media, police-community relations**, and **police administrators** impact officers' decision to stay in or leave the profession
  - ▶ Half of the current officers (n=7) said that their experiences thus far have matched their expectations of the profession prior to being hired
  - ▶ But nearly all former officers (n=4) said that their experiences in law enforcement did not match their expectations about the career prior to entering the occupation

“No...the first thing you see that you get interested in and I think most people. . .well speaking of myself, the first thing I saw was, you know, you're running and gunning, you're kicking in doors, you're catching bad guys, you know? You see all that stuff on “Cops.” When I got into law enforcement, that's what I was expecting because I was younger, so I was hoping for that kind of career. . .that kind of like chase. . .”

- Former Officer #4

# Findings

- ▶ All participating officers (n=14) stated that **department culture** and **police administrators** play a significant role in whether officers choose to stay in or leave the profession
  - ▶ Emphasis on supportive administrators and how they can influence the culture within the agency

“Yes, 100%. I think [department culture is] one of the biggest factors [impacting retention], regardless of the outside, regardless of what the media says, or whatever your current climate is. I think the department's culture is the biggest thing that keeps officers because once the department's culture flips. . .sours and flips to admin[istration] versus patrol, people leave. Whenever you feel like – and this is speaking from a sole patrol cop. I've never been a supervisor – once I feel like admin doesn't have my back anymore, I don't feel like I could do the job anymore. You have to have support in this job. . .”

- Current Officer #8

# Findings

- ▶ Participating officers also discussed whether they **feel they can share thoughts/ideas and feedback** with their administrators
  - ▶ While some said yes, most reported feeling as though their feedback was not valued or taken into consideration by police administrators
    - ▶ And they felt this could be a reason why officers considering leaving law enforcement
    - ▶ Concerns related to generational differences and what we know about Gen Z (those entering the job market today)

# Findings

“I mean, they’ve given the appearance of that. When our chief first became chief, he’s like, “I want to meet with every officer one-on-one and we’re going to talk about what we can do better.” Everyone’s like, “Oh yeah, this is great!” Like one-on-one with the main boss? We get to speak honestly about stuff. And so many people gave great examples of things that can be done a little differently. It wasn’t just people complaining and being like, “Well, I don’t like this and I don’t like this.” It’s like, “This is an issue that I’m seeing and here is a solution that you guys can do.” And none of that got implemented. Everyone’s like, “Well, what was the point of that?” Like you just want to give the appearance that you’re doing something so that you can check a box and go, “Look what I did!” and not actually value anything that we say? So, what’s the point? Do we have the opportunity to share our opinions? Yes. Are they implemented and changed? No.”

- Current Officer #8

# Findings

- ▶ After discussing the impact of various stressors on officers, Jennifer and I asked participants about whether and how officers cope with them
  - ▶ First, participating officers were asked whether they thought police officers were comfortable **speaking with fellow police officers** about struggling with their mental health due to occupational stress
    - ▶ Nearly all participating officers (current and former) said no (n=11)

“I think it’s still maybe a personality trait it seems more so than anything. It’s just the type of people that we are. We’re not somebody that...or the type of people that even if were struggling, were going to say it. I think more than anything it’s just being [in] a male-dominant profession. Men are just not good at express[ing] their emotions in general.”

- Current Officer #2

# Findings

“I don’t want to say [it]’s ok, but you know what I mean. . .it’s just not talked about so much. Probably because we talk shit. You know, “Oh look. That guy is still milking that? Why isn’t he coming in already? Get over it!” And I’ll be the first to say I’m guilty of it too. I’ll say it. I’ll be like, “Are you kidding me? I’ve gone through worse and I’m still there,” I was this, I was that, and I’m still there. Doesn’t mean I was better – just that I’m better at putting it to the side, you know what I mean? And getting over it and [knowing] that I don’t have that luxury of saying, “Oh, I have mental health issues.” No bullshit. Man up and get to work. So, at the same time, I’m guilty of talking shit too. . .”

- Former Officer #1

# Findings

- ▶ We also asked participating officers whether they thought police officers were comfortable **speaking with family members and friends** about struggling with their mental health due to occupational stress
  - ▶ Nearly all participating officers (current and former) said no (n=10)

“I think that it’s very few people that will talk about the occupational stress, especially to family because you don’t want them... they’re already going to worry. Whether they hide it or not, they’re going to. You’re not going to go talk to your mom about some shooting. No. You might be 42 in this job, but your mom is going to see you as the little fella that she cleaned up, lotioned up, and took care of. That’s probably not fair to those family members either. I’m sure there’s a few [who would talk to their family], but very little if they are. . .”

- Current Officer #6

# Findings

- ▶ Lastly, participants were asked whether they thought police officers would be **willing to seek professional help** for mental health issues stemming from occupational stressors
  - ▶ Nearly all participating officers (current and former) said no (n=13)

“I would say it’s the culture in law enforcement where it’s kind of like, be a tough guy and suck it up. Which. . .you have to be for a good portion of the job. . .coming in on your days off or working when you don’t want to [or] working long hours. You do have to suck it up and just work. You [have to] know when to apply that tough man mindset and when not [to]. When it comes to your mental health, it’s not time to be tough. You have to do what’s best for your health. But I think most people take that same [tough guy] mindset and apply it [to] their mental health.”

- Current Officer #9



# Findings

“If someone finds out. . .I don’t know how they’ve changed that lately, but if you disclose [mental health issues] on like a background packet, you’re a liability. . .or you could be seen as a liability if [you] can’t handle stress. Part of the job is the ability to handle stress and be able to do the job, but if I hire someone that is already seeing a shrink because they can’t cope? Like really? It’s not cheap to hire an officer, to go through the background and suit ‘em up, and train them, and all that. You’re an investment to that agency. And they’re not going to invest in someone. . .or I think that they wouldn’t invest in someone who is already having mental health issues, you know what I mean?”

- Former Officer #1

# Discussion

- ▶ Although preliminary, our findings thus far are fairly consistent with what the Police Executive Research Forum (2019) found:
  - ▶ Participating officers agree that various factors impact whether officers choose to stay in or leave the profession
  - ▶ More specifically, police administrators play a pivotal role in shaping department culture and providing support to officers, which participants felt can directly impact an officer's choice to leave the job
    - ▶ Therefore, it's important that police administrators understand the impact of their words and action when it comes to officer retention

# Discussion

- ▶ In addition, our preliminary findings also suggest that officers continue to be hesitant to discuss occupational stress and related mental health issues with others (e.g., their peers, family/friends, and mental health professionals)
  - ▶ This is consistent with what is known about police culture (Skolnick, 1966)
    - ▶ Officers not wanting to be perceived as weak, fearful of judgment from others (both inside and outside of law enforcement)
  - ▶ Interestingly, the current officers who participated in this study work for a local law enforcement agency that proudly advertises a commitment to addressing mental health issues among its officers
    - ▶ Officer on staff who has specialized training in counseling; runs a required annual training for officers
    - ▶ “Easy” access to mental health resources
    - ▶ Confidential participation in counseling sessions

# Class Discussion

- ▶ I would like you to take a few minutes to talk to your peers near you about the following:
  1. How can police agencies work to destigmatize experiencing mental health issues among officers?
  2. How can police agencies encourage officers to seek mental health treatment if/when needed?

# Thank You!

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