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Stress and Wellness Among Municipal Law Enforcement Officers in Southeastern Virginia

Russell Morgan Granderson
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Walden University

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Russell Granderson

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Stress and Wellness Among Municipal Law Enforcement Officers in Southeastern

Virginia

by

Russell Granderson

MS, University of Richmond, 2007

BS, Bryant & Stratton College, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy & Administration

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Abstract

Municipal law enforcement officers contend with unique occupational stressors. They must overcome stress from their employing agency and the pressures that arise from performing their basic enforcement duties. This study was designed to examine how municipal law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia perceived their agency's wellness policy and to determine what recommendations they had to improve the effectiveness of the current wellness policy. Lazarus and Folkman's theory of cognitive appraisal and coping served as the theoretical framework for the study. Qualitative inquiry was used to examine the perceptions of 15 purposively sampled law enforcement officer participants. The data were then analyzed thematically, resulting in key findings that indicated junior officers are more likely to use institutional wellness services, such as PEER support and employee assistance programs, than senior officers. The data also suggest that officers prefer improved access with enhanced confidentiality to PEER members and the agency psychologist. It is recommended that supervisors and those in leadership roles become champions of agency wellness policy espousing the benefits of available resources. More research is needed to determine positive stress coping mechanisms for senior officers. Positive social change for municipal law enforcement officers could be realized through the use of wellness-focused public safety organizations that would improve the mental health of employees via more practical wellness policy, as well as by removing the cultural stigma attached to seeking support through institutional counseling services.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to the thousands of public safety personnel who sacrifice their health and safety to ensure the wellbeing of others.

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Thanks to my wife, Jacqueline, and daughter, Fransheska, who have been very patient with me during the process of completing my research. Many thanks to the Police Chief of Southeastern Virginia law enforcement who allowed me to conduct this study and to those great patrol officers who participated. Finally, a special acknowledgement to my beloved sister Kim, who died on December 13, 2017.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Occupational stress has become a growing concern among industrialized nations. Employees who enjoy their work are more engaged and productive, whereas stressed employees produce less and are marginally committed (Howatt, Amell, Adams, & Houston, 2018). When workers endure daily workplace hassles, absenteeism increases, and less work is accomplished. Due to workplace stressors, law enforcement officers experience a high risk for mental health disturbances, diminished well-being, and job burnout (Maran et al., 2018). Law enforcement officers must contend with both organizational and operational stress (Carr & Maxwell, 2017). Municipal agencies should seek to implement policies that promote a less stressful and less demanding working environment, while fostering healthy employee well-being.

Occupational stress is an abiding concern because of its potential to disrupt employee lifestyle outside the workplace. Over the past decade, researchers have found stress to be associated with many negative physiological and psychological outcomes (Wolter et al., 2018). Often employees do not discover the adverse effects of stress until adaptive biological responses have occurred (Bano & Talib, 2017). In municipal law enforcement, there are aspects of the job that compound stress levels such as low pay, high liability, minimal social support, and negative public perception (Bureau of Justice Assistance [BJA], 2018). Moreover, the requirement for around-the-clock coverage often creates mandatory overtime and less time for officers to spend with their families (Steinkopf, Hakala, & Van Hasselt, 2015). Job inherent danger and episodic stressors can

increase the chances that officers will also be affected when they are off duty. Therefore, law enforcement agencies should focus on wellness and educating officers on the dangers of unmanaged stress.

Unmanaged stress can be a substantial source for many diseases commonly linked with the health of municipal law enforcement officers. Officers have higher morbidity and mortality rates and are more likely to develop stress-related addictions than any other professional group (Han, Park, Park, Hwang, & Kim, 2018). Additionally, the daily demands of acute stressors, handling human misery, comforting victimized children, and making instant decisions in life-and-death situations can also become overwhelming (Violanti et al., 2017). The compounding of individual health issues with job stress can also lead to feelings of hopelessness and depression (McLachlan & Gale, 2018). Elevated officer stress levels combined with the inherent professional risk factors can increase the chances of developing more serious health problems.

Law enforcement leaders should have a legitimate concern about how stress affects officers. From 2003 to 2014, an average of 115 municipal law enforcement officers were killed in the line of duty each year (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2018). However, those deaths occurred at the hands of violent offenders and motor vehicle accidents. Each year, even more officers die by suicide than the total number killed by offenders and vehicle collisions (Bano & Talib, 2017). When a municipal organization experiences a line of duty death, there are harmful ramifications within officer ranks and the communities they serve. Moreover, law enforcement agencies are also devastated financially by nonfatal injuries. From 2009–2014, approximately 30,990

officer injuries resulted in time away from work (BLS, 2018). However, these numbers only represent the physical injuries sustained by officers and do not include psychological disturbances. Law enforcement leaders must prepare officers for managing the stressors of their job to reduce the risk of injury and potentially minimize employee absences.

The daily recurrence of acute stressors makes law enforcement officers at higher risk for mental health disturbances, lowered well-being, and job burnout (Maran et al., 2018). Rao and Singh (2017) asserted that occupational stress induces harmful physical and emotional stimuli, which occur when job requirements do not match the abilities, skills, or resources of the officer. For example, a patrol officer may be dually assigned to a traffic detail by a supervising sergeant for the purpose of writing a large volume of traffic citations. Simultaneously the officer may also be held responsible to answer service calls in a high-crime area where requests for assistance are dispatched constantly. The officer realizes that meeting the objective of the traffic detail would be nearly impossible, yet when the officer converses with the supervisor, the supervising sergeant's expectations are not altered. When the demands and requirements of the workplace are elevated and the employee has limited power to influence how the work is organized or produced, stress often manifests (Rozañov, 2017). Law enforcement officers maintain a higher risk for mental health disturbances and job burnout because they have little control over how their work is performed.

Law enforcement is unique in that officers must combat stress derived mainly from dichotomous sources: their employing agency and the demands that originate from their operational duties. Organizational stress includes characteristic stressors of the

organization and stress derived from interpersonal relationships between officers and supervisors (Violanti et al., 2016). Operational stress involves experiencing traumatic events, mandatory overtime, shift work, and threats of physical harm (Carr & Maxwell, 2017). The workplace pressures produced by both organizational and operational stress can negatively impact the well-being of officers.

This study focuses on occupational stress found in southeastern Virginia law enforcement and exploring more practical wellness policies. This chapter presents the research topic background, research problem, significance of the study, theoretical framework, and operational definitions.

Background of the Problem

Municipal law enforcement officers are sworn to maintain order and protect the lives and property of citizens by enforcing local and state laws (BLS, 2018). Currently, there are approximately 700,000 full-time municipal law enforcement officers across the U. S. (BLS, 2018). Law enforcement can be dangerous, physically demanding, and stressful (BLS, 2018). At any time, officers may face serious conflict with criminals; therefore, municipal law enforcement officers perennially possess one of the highest rates of injuries and illnesses of all occupations each year (BLS, 2018).

Although the law enforcement profession is recognized as a high-risk and stressful occupation, officers are not trained to manage the stress of their job. The pressures of both organizational and operational stressors can be overwhelming to officers who do not possess personal resources (Maran et al., 2018; Pereira, Queiros, & Silva, 2015). Moreover, law enforcement culture practices social avoidance, which often

leaves officers feeling isolated (Violanti et al., 2017). Officers assume that seeking professional assistance for job-related stress could deem them unfit for duty and leave them feeling discredited (Bell & Eski, 2015). However, there is a gap in the literature because it remains unknown how practical wellness policy designed to reduce stress is implemented in southeastern Virginia. During my review of the literature, no studies of municipal law enforcement focused on improving wellness policy in southeastern Virginia law enforcement.

Statement of Problem

Law enforcement agencies emphasize the physical and psychological well-being of officer applicants during the initial employment process. When officers attend the basic police academy, they are orientated into the law enforcement culture, which includes courses in criminal law, a rigorous fitness regimen, defensive tactics, and emergency driving (Aiello, 2019). However, despite perennial high rates of officer suicides, alcoholism, divorce, hypertension, and stress-related ailments, officers are not trained to handle workplace stress (Violanti et al., 2017). Stressed officers may fail to manage job pressure adequately and ultimately struggle to make quick decisions due to slowed cognition (Gutshall, Hampton, Sebetan, Stein, & Broxterman, 2017). Presently the literature acknowledges the implementation of employee assistance programs (EAPs), peer support teams (PEERs), and enlarged roles for mental health professionals who partner with law enforcement agencies (Donnelly, Valentine, & Oehme, 2015). However, southeastern Virginia law enforcement primarily prepares officers for operational proficiency, and officers are left to manage the stressors of the workplace on their own

and potentially do not reach optimum performance levels due to stress. It remains unknown how southeastern Virginia law enforcement can develop a more practical wellness policy or what recommendations municipal officers have to improve the effectiveness of current wellness policy.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore more practical wellness policy options. When officers operate at optimum physical and psychological strength, they are more resilient to workplace stress and the communities they serve are rewarded (Bell & Eski, 2015). In gaining understanding of how southeastern Virginia law enforcement officers describe their personal stress experiences and by exploring how they currently manage stress through the current wellness policy, positive social change may occur via scholarship, reflection, and advocacy (Callahan et al., 2012). Many officers have used deleterious methods to manage their stress, which has been explored throughout law enforcement stress literature (Robinson, 2018). The law enforcement culture and individual frustration has led those officers to internalize their emotions, practice isolation, overwork themselves, and depend heavily on alcohol and drugs (BJA, 2018). However, no studies have been found that specifically address wellness policy for southeastern Virginia police officers.

This study was designed to examine how officers in a southeastern Virginia police department perceive their wellness policy for reducing stress and to determine what recommendations law enforcement officers report to improve the effectiveness of their current policy.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia municipal law enforcement perceive their wellness policy for reducing stress?

RQ2: What recommendations do municipal law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia report to improve the effectiveness of current policy?

Theoretic Framework

A worldview is an individual's construct developed by experiencing a phenomenon (Patton, 2016). Law enforcement officers construct world views to make sense of their experiences while meeting the environmental demands of their jobs. Officers are trained to detect deception and mediate citizen disagreements but may fail to leave their authority and responsibilities at work (Saunders, Kotzias, & Ramchand, 2019). Therefore, some officers find themselves constantly stressed and feeling they are always on the job even when they are off duty (Carr & Maxwell, 2017). If agencies had policies that promoted stress management, officers may be more engaged, their well-being may improve, and there might be less job burnout since individual stress levels depend on perception (Hansson, Hurtig, Lauritz, & Padyab, 2017). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argued that there is no objective means to determine the intensity of stress to each person because what may prove stressful for one may not be stressful for others. In their stress research, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) asserted that people naturally conduct cognitive appraisals that help determine why and to what extent a transaction or series of transactions between an individual and the environment is stressful.

During my career as a law enforcement officer, I have seen officers react differently to the same set of circumstances. While one officer may find humor in being the target of a citizen's profanity, another officer may become angry and ponder various methods of retaliation. People who have strong emotional and behavioral resources are more resilient to environmental demands (Rozanov, 2017). According to the cognitive appraisal and stress coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) individuals who do not possess personal resources in given situations are vulnerable and can become overwhelmed, evoking a stress response.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described stress as a relationship between people and their environment that is appraised as taxing, thereby endangering their well-being. The theory of cognitive appraisal contends that when an individual is confronted with an environmental demand (stressor), the person determines if the transaction is stressful via a subjective appraisal process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to the transactional stress theory, the person considers whether they are in trouble and what, if anything, can be done about it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the law enforcement profession, domestic disturbances are dangerous yet common service calls that officers respond to. When an officer arrives on scene, the officer must make every effort to be aware of any aggressive people, potential weapons within reach, and additional family members who may become involved. After considering all factors, officers determine whether their primary appraisal of the environment is irrelevant, positive, or stressful (Rozanov, 2017). The intensity of the stressor is determined by the officer's appraisal process against environmental demands and available coping resources. Municipal law enforcement

agencies provide officers tasers, bulletproof vests, firearms, and batons to defend against physical assaults, but the agencies do little to support or maintain the psychological well-being of officers.

While stress is often associated with negative outcomes, stress can be managed successfully with positive coping skills. According to the cognitive appraisal and stress coping theory, when a person appraises a set of circumstances and perceives that there is a potential threat or challenge, a secondary appraisal occurs to determine if the person possesses the coping resources to adequately manage that situation (Robinson, 2018). The secondary appraisal will result in the individual's perception of the circumstances as stressful or not (Rozanov, 2017). Stressful demands can affect officer safety through delayed cognition and reaction (Gutshall et al., 2017). Stressed officers who encounter a violent offender with a gun may fail to quickly process potential harm to themselves and others. Despite working in a stressful environment, officers who possess positive stress management skills are more prepared to handle workplace stress.

Nature of the Study

In this study, I sought to capture essences and meanings instead of seeking quantity and frequency, as is found in quantitative studies. Researchers use qualitative studies to elicit understandings and experiences of those individuals who live them (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). In this study, experiences were constructed through anonymous surveys completed by municipal law enforcement officers. In qualitative inquiry, researchers attempt to understand phenomena in natural settings (Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

Qualitative inquiry was selected because I believed that municipal law enforcement officers would be able to provide depth using their own unique terminology to describe their experiences of stress and how they have attempted to manage it. Law enforcement officers are suspicious of outsiders and can be reluctant to discuss personal experiences with anyone outside the profession. I assumed that with my law enforcement background and many years of experience working as a patrol officer, officers would not be apprehensive in completing the study's survey.

An official request for approval to conduct this study was made to Southeastern Virginia Police Department, prior to initiating any data collection (see Appendix A). Prior to beginning, I sought approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for human subject research. The IRB is a research governing body comprised of Walden University committee members created for the purpose of reviewing research to maintain compliance of the ethical standards established by U.S. federal regulations (Walden, 2017). During this study, I analyzed data obtained from 15 respondent surveys, and at that time data saturation occurred (Creswell, 2013). All participating officers were asked to completely review an informed consent form prior to completing their survey. The informed consent indicated the purpose of the study, a description and duration of the participant's involvement, potential benefits and risks, highlighted all potential discomfort, and provided a declaration of confidentiality.

Operational Definitions

Acute stress: Short-term stress produced by daily interaction with the world that typically disappears (Howatt et al., 2018).

Chronic stress: The end product of an acute stressor, such as a work-related issue, that occurs routinely and wears on an employee putting them at risk of suffering stress-related illnesses (Howatt, 2018).

Critical incident: Any event that causes a stressful impact powerful enough to overwhelm the coping skills of an individual (Violanti et al., 2017).

Episodic stress: Multiple stressful events or circumstances occurring repeatedly, creating a pattern of acute stress (Alekhine & Boucherand, 2017).

Occupational stress: The harmful physical and emotional stimuli that occur when job requirements do not match the abilities, skills, or resources of the worker (Rao & Singh, 2017).

PEER support team: Law enforcement officers who possess basic counselling skills and have been trained to recognize their peers in distress at work (Karaffa & Koch, 2015).

Stress: A feeling borne from a perceived threat of risk outside a person's psychological resources (Lazarus, 1999).

Assumptions

Assumptions are those aspects of research over which the examiner does not have direct control (Simon, 2011). In qualitative research, examiners assume that reality is subjective and that patterns and theories can be explained through participant essences and understandings (Simon, 2011). This study expounded upon municipal law enforcement officer experiences with the stress phenomenon. The literature indicates that municipal officers commonly interact with demands of dichotomous environmental

sources: organizational and operational stress (Carr & Maxwell, 2017). These demands were also assumed to be prevalent among law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia.

There was also an assumption that officers would not be completely transparent or would not be forthcoming in sharing their personal experiences under stress and subsequent stress coping, due to the law enforcement subculture that can indirectly provoke individual vulnerability. On the other hand, it was also assumed that the anonymous survey methodology of this study would help promote truthful participant responses. Another assumption was that the COVID-19 pandemic would be more likely to adversely affect this study by lowering participation or skewing responses; however, this circumstance did not occur.

Scope and Delimitations

The delimitations are characteristics that limit the scope and define the boundaries of a study, which include the studies' objective, research questions, and theoretical perspective (Simon, 2011). The delimitations of this study were to understand experiences of uniformed municipal law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia. The literature has suggested that individual municipal law enforcement officers historically have suffered physiologically and psychologically resulting from workplace demands and a lack of positive stress management mechanisms (Maran et al., 2018). Moreover, the law enforcement site in this study does not train officers on how to manage their stress.

There are numerous categories of law enforcement professionals, such as federal officers and Virginia sheriff deputies, who do not share the fundamental duties of a municipal law enforcement officer. The boundaries of this study only included patrol officer participants, rated below the rank of sergeant. Patrol officers are the lowest ranking members of municipal law enforcement departments. The basic duties of patrol officers involve extensive contact with the public, writing traffic tickets, addressing neighborhood disturbances, investigating vehicle accidents, and testifying in court. Law enforcement supervisors at the rank of sergeant and above were omitted due to management level differences in their basic job duties and responsibilities.

In this study, I did not use conceptual frameworks that included biometric indicators of stress, such as cortisol levels and blood pressure measurement. Neither did I seek to determine the intensity of officer stress levels. The results of this study can be transferred to other southeastern Virginia law enforcement agencies situated in similar sized communities and that possess comparable staff numbers.

Limitations

Limitations are potential areas of weakness in a study that are outside the researcher's control (Simon, 2011). One limitation of this study was its dependence on honest responses from participants. Although participants were able to complete the survey in their own privacy, some respondents may have felt distrustful of the study's ability to maintain anonymity. Another limitation of this study is that it only captured data from those officers who volunteered to complete the survey. Therefore,

generalization of the results is limited. This study was also potentially limited by respondents' proficiency of interpreting the intended meaning of the survey items.

The online survey methodology of this study prevented me from asking probing questions; therefore, the structured questions may have limited clarity of responses. Participants who completed the survey while they were working may have felt rushed or were possibly unable to recall specific information. This study could also be limited by my bias in interpreting the data correctly. However, I was cognizant of my personal exposure to police occupational stress and those experiences were bracketed during this study. Additionally, I consulted the IRB guidelines for conducting research within a workplace setting and implemented an anonymous methodology to minimize potential challenges.

Significance of the Study

Despite the availability of institutional resources such as EAP and PEER support units, occupational stress continues to negatively affect the wellness of officers and the viability of police agencies. This study adds to the existing body of research on occupational stress within municipal law enforcement patrol ranks and may provide evidentiary value for practical wellness policies. Little is known in regard to improving wellness policy for officers in southeastern Virginia. With thousands of municipal officers contending with occupational stress, the outcome of this study could lead to positive social change through public safety organizations to improve the health of its employees via more practical wellness policies. The findings could also contribute to

positive social change by reducing the cultural stigma of seeking support through institutional counseling services.

Summary

Occupational stress is a major concern among industrialized nations. In law enforcement, various sources of stress created by police agencies and enforcement duties distinguish officers as being at a high risk for mental health disturbances, diminished well-being, and job burnout (Maran et al., 2018). Additionally, officers are often pressured by low pay, high liability, and limited social support outside of law enforcement (BJA, 2018).

When officers do not possess stress coping skills, they may feel overwhelmed and fear seeking support from their agency. Stressed officers fail to manage job pressure adequately and may struggle with making quick decisions when necessary (Steinkopf et al., 2015). Municipal law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia contend with organizational and operational stress—just as other municipal officers do across the United States. However, currently there is no practical wellness policy in place that specifically trains officers to manage their stress. In this study, I attempted to identify how officers in southeastern Virginia perceived their wellness policy and to obtain recommendations for improvements to the current stress policy.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Municipal law enforcement has been found to be a stressful occupation (Pereira et al., 2017). Law enforcement officers risk their lives daily to maintain public order, and over 100 officers are killed each year in the line of duty (BLS, 2019). Officers may witness the murder of a fellow officer, investigate vehicle accidents with serious injuries, manage domestic assaults, and respond to community disturbances during their regular work shift (Bano & Talib, 2017). The inherent nature of the profession demands that those charged to maintain order arm themselves with personal stress management resources. When officers do not possess stress management skills, stress can take a psychological and physiological toll. Law enforcement officers have higher rates of alcohol abuse, suicide, divorce, heart disease, job burnout, and lower morale than the general population (Violanti et al., 2017). This chapter is a review of the literature on the common stressors of law enforcement officers, physical and psychological effects of stress, law enforcement culture, officer suicide, and the viability of institutional resources. This chapter will also discuss common reasons officers do not use stress management resources offered by their organization.

Chapter 2 begins with a delineation of the search strategies used to complete the review of the literature. Next, the theoretical framework, which includes Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal and stress coping theory, in relation to municipal law enforcement officers is discussed. This comprehensive review of the literature is

divided into several sections to develop understanding of individual stress management among municipal officers.

Literature Search Strategy

I explored the existing literature after obtaining peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles from online resources. I used several databases: Sage Journals, ProQuest Central, PsycINFO, Thoreau Multi-Database Search, and Google Scholar. These databases were searched using terms such as *theory of cognitive appraisal and stress coping, police stress, occupational stress, organizational stress, operational stress, psychosocial stress, stress adaptation, law enforcement suicide, PEER support, and EAP services.*

Review of the Literature

Society depends on law enforcement officers to maintain order and protect the public from disruption and harm in often stressful environments. The success of this objective largely depends on the individual well-being of the officer. While many public safety employees are directly impacted by the demands of their duties, law enforcement officers must contend with both organizational and operational stress. Organizational stress is comprised of environmental demands naturally found in law enforcement agencies (Carr & Maxwell, 2017). Sources of organizational stress include demands of heavy workload, poor relationships between peers and supervisors, and lack of control of work processes (Wolter et al., 2018). Operational stress is derived from performing the basic duties of law enforcement, handling traumatic events, verbal threats, assaultive behavior, and assisting victimized citizens (Maran et al., 2018). These daily stressors are left on the shoulders of officers to manage on their own. However, a larger issue that

officers face is that the law enforcement culture, which was originated to protect officers from outside influence, can also engender stress. Most municipal law enforcement agencies provide intervention benefits through institutional programs, such as PEER support teams and EAPs, but they are often underutilized by members (Tucker, 2015). This is a problem for law enforcement agencies because the community expects to be protected by officers who are psychologically healthy and well balanced.

The last decade has seen increased interest in law enforcement stress research, but little has been found to improve practical wellness policy. Zavala and Curry (2017) noted that officers who relied on their spirituality for wellness were less likely to engage in alcohol consumption to relieve stress. However, the study was cross sectional and a clear determination of causal relationship between religious coping and alcohol consumption could not be verified (Zavala & Curry, 2017). Can and Hendy (2014) conducted research on officers to determine physiological and psychological outcomes of stressful situations at work and concluded that frequent experiences of occupational stress were associated with low self-esteem, intimate partner aggression, and repressed anger. However, their research participants contained a homogenous population of Caucasian men (Can & Hendy, 2014). Additionally, Han et al. (2018) concluded that occupational stressors positioned law enforcement officers at a higher risk for development of cardiovascular disease in comparison to other public safety officers. But their study used a limited 10-code system to identify diseases, which potentially could overestimate results (Han et al., 2018). In a related study, Steinkopf et al., (2015) argued that institutional psychological intervention services were mainly unused by law enforcement officers. Consequently,

Steinkopf et al.'s (2015) study supported prior research, arguing that perceived barriers within the law enforcement culture and stigma of EAPs inhibit officers from seeking help. In sum, existing studies strongly highlight the pivotal role of law enforcement and emphasize the need for evidence-based stress management strategies.

Cognitive Appraisal and Coping

Workplace stress has been attributed to approximately \$190 billion in U.S. health care costs (Blanding, 2015). Due to extensive interaction with members of society who are inclined to be aggressive, violent, and difficult to manage, public service workers make up the largest proportion of financial compensatory claims (Brough, Drummond, & Biggs, 2018). More specifically, municipal law enforcement officers are the first point of contact for distressed citizens seeking help (Wasserman, Meiring, & Becker, 2019). The constant exposure to demanding circumstances is common for officers. Since crime and criminal activity happens spontaneously, officers have little control over how and when their work is performed. According to Brough et al., (2018) when employees work in an environment that harbors elevated job demands and employees possess only a low level of job control, they experience higher levels of stress. In contrast, employees who successfully manage workplace demands are more likely to increase personal satisfaction with their employer, jobs, and life in general (Srivastava & Tang, 2018). Proponents of the theory of cognitive appraisal and coping argue that practical use of the theory can favorably contribute to individual health by guiding cognition and responses to given circumstances.

Because critical decision making is often necessary for a law enforcement officer, careful consideration of personal resources needed to manage stress is essential. The theory of cognitive appraisal represents the process that occurs when a person evaluates the meaning of a potentially stressful event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A person's cognitive appraisal is a subjective process that helps determine whether a perceived demand is good or bad for that person and facilitates the selection of the chosen coping method if needed (Gomes, Faria, & Lopes, 2016). However, a stress reaction occurs when an individual perceives that they do not possess the behavioral or emotional resources to manage the demand. When used in the municipal law enforcement environment, cognitive appraisal and coping may offer positive options to officers with unique world views, including those who are cynical and apathetic toward their jobs (Trinkner, Tyler, & Goff, 2016). Clearly, officers who are confident with their personal resources will appraise environmental demands more favorably and from a position of strength and authority.

Primary appraisal. During the cognitive appraisal process, a person conducts a primary appraisal followed by a secondary appraisal when necessary (Jamieson, Hangen, Lee, & Yeager, 2018). A person's primary appraisal is a natural process that determines the extent to which a demand or an event is a threat or nonthreat to their well-being (Hewett, Liefoghe, Visockaite, & Roongrengsuke, 2018). During the primary appraisal process, personal factors, such as the individual's commitment, values, style of thinking, and the environment, are key elements for interpretation; therefore, the demand of the circumstance is subjective from person to person (Robinson, 2018). In other words, an

individual's thoughts and perceptions of a demand will determine the level of stress to be endured. The theory of cognitive appraisal relates to the present study because law enforcement officers are constantly appraising their organizational and operational environment, which indirectly determines the impact of their cognitive process. Officers must then apply a positive stress coping mechanism to successfully manage their circumstances.

The result of an individual's cognitive appraisal depends on how an individual evaluates the situation and the common way they cope (Gomes et al., 2016). A person's primary appraisal will conclude in a finding of either irrelevant, benign, or stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). An appraisal that is determined irrelevant has no stressful implications for an individual's well-being, and nothing is lost or gained to that person (Gomes et al., 2016). When positive appraisals occur, the person has considered the circumstances benign and emotions such as joy, happiness, and elation may become evident (Jamieson et al., 2018). However, a person may feel stressed when there is an appraisal of harm/loss, threat, or challenge (Howatt et al., 2018). Each of these circumstances are common occurrences that happen in the police service (Wasserman et al., 2019).

In appraisals of harm/loss, the person has sustained a personal injury, loss of a loved one, or damage to self-esteem (Jamieson et al., 2018). For example, harm/loss would occur through a line of duty death of a fellow officer or being demoted to a lower rank, could precipitate a loss of self-esteem. Threat appraisals are characterized by emotions of fear, anxiety, and anger which could lead further to feelings of potential

harm/loss, when anticipated by the officer (Rozanov, 2017). An officer receiving knowledge that regular working hours will be extended from eight to twelve hours shifts, which could potentially disrupt time normally spent with family and other personal close associates, may react with anger at his employer and engender anxiety due to increased family expenditures. Challenge appraisals are focused on opportunity of personal growth and development and encompass a spirit of excitement and eagerness to meet the demands. For example, an officer who receives a promotion can be reason for a challenge appraisal but can conversely provoke thoughts of threat due to the new demands required of the position.

Secondary appraisal. When individuals are faced with a continued threat or challenge, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argued that a secondary appraisal process occurs whereas the individual considers which coping options are available, the potentiality that the coping option will be successful, and the likelihood that the person will apply it effectively. During the secondary appraisal, should the person perceive that their personal resources are not adequate to meet the demands, that individual will conclude that they are vulnerable (Alekhine & Boucherand, 2017). From the beginning of their careers, officers are socialized into the law enforcement culture whereas a superhuman syndrome is often assumed (Deschenes, Desjardins, & Dussault, 2018). When influenced by the superhuman syndrome, officers do not talk about their feelings or personal problems because the law enforcement culture is not conducive to being communicatively open to feelings and emotions (Deschenes et al., 2018). In duress, people naturally appraise their

personal resources for adequate coping options, however officers are often deceived by thoughts of superhuman ability.

In my professional experience as a law enforcement officer, I have personally seen officers derail their careers because they strongly ascribed to thoughts of superhuman strength in their own ability to stress cope with job trauma or critical incidents. Those officers always seemed to profess that they were doing fine and often disdained opportunities to receive personal support. Although outwardly negative changes in their behavior was obvious to others, nothing could be done unless the officers asked for assistance. Without a workable plan or strong support system, the ramifications of mismanaged stress can be financially, professionally, and socially costly to officers, their agencies, and the communities that they serve.

Stress Coping

The relationship between stress and how it ultimately affects people is based upon their ability to cope with demands. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described coping as a process of constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage demands that are appraised by the individual as taxing or exceeding personal resources. Brough et al., (2018) asserted that stress can be made insignificant provided that an appropriate coping mechanism is used. Coping consist of efforts made to manage demands whether a positive outcome is achieved. The appropriateness of a coping mechanism is determined by its effect against the demand and its effect long term (Gutshall et al., 2017). Thus, officers who are successfully able to cope with environmental demands are more likely to attain positive outcomes.

Coping styles consist of emotion focused and problem focused coping (Robinson, 2018). Individuals use emotion-focused coping to minimize personal distress, such as engaging in social avoidance, distancing, selective attention, and alcohol consumption (Robinson, 2018). Certain emotion coping strategies have been shown to increase the risk of mental and physical health problems (Steinkopf et al., 2015). Emotional coping sometimes may make one feel better initially but tend to cause worse problems later. Emotional coping includes drinking alcohol to excess, smoking tobacco, eating high sugar snack foods, angry outbursts, and internalizing anger (Can & Hendy, 2014). Some emotional coping mechanisms may foster inefficiency and negativity within the workplace, these behaviors include procrastination and avoidance (Wasserman et al., 2019) Although coping preferences are made by each person, unhealthy emotion focused coping decisions can negatively impact organizational efficiency.

While emotion focused coping may provide a short-term positive response, individuals who apply problem focused coping increase their chances of improved outcomes. Problem focused coping entails examining the demand, developing a plan, measuring the alternatives in terms of costs and benefits, then choosing an option and acting upon it (Robinson, 2018). Problem focused coping has been found to be more effective when individuals believe that their situation can be ameliorated with sincere effort (Hewett et al., 2018). For example, if an officer witnessed his partner deliberately misrepresent facts of a case during trial testimony, instead of remaining silent or feigning unawareness, the officer could employ problem focused coping. In problem focused coping, the officer considers the options available. In one option, the officer could speak

with the prosecuting attorney privately to provide the factual details then additionally make a complaint to his department's internal affairs office against his partner. In another option, the officer could confront his partner and request that he confess to the perjured testimony. The advantages of problem focused coping are that it enables analysis of each set of circumstances, provides a systematic method to weigh costs versus benefits, then helps facilitate a plan of action.

Early officer mortality, elevated levels of health issues, and the high cost of medical expenditures have led to strong emphasis on finding viable solutions to the problem of stress management. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory could assist municipal law enforcement officers by providing evidence-based resource to combat stressors that are often found within their profession.

Organizational Stress

Municipal law enforcement officers face a myriad of common organizational stressors. Organizational stress is derived from the internal characteristics of law enforcement agencies. These stressors include minimalized autonomy, lack of organizational support, limited social support, perceived organizational unfairness, a dearth of promotional opportunities, and ineffective communication (Bano & Talib, 2017). While operational duties are more dangerous to personal safety, patrol officers have consistently cited organizational stressors to be more stressful (Deschenes et al., 2018). One reason is that municipal law enforcement agencies are primarily structured as paramilitary organizations which minimizes autonomy and individual decision making to those on the bottom level of the hierarchy, causing patrol officers to feel isolated.

Organizational stressors are more likely to impugn officer morale and further promote bureaucracy. While inhibiting officers from reaching optimal level, organizational stress can also engender division within the ranks. Despite wearing the same badge which is identified with authority in the community, the hierarchal structure of municipal law enforcement organizations can weaken the morale of patrol officers, engendering envy and frustration.

Although authority is important, officers who follow leaders that espouse unity and teamwork help promote a positive work environment. According to Rao and Singh (2017) law enforcement organizations that do not advocate mutual trust and a shared vision have less officer commitment and lowered well-being. Moreover, when officers perceive that they are not supported by their leaders they are less likely to be engaged with their agencies' mission (Rao & Singh, 2017). Officers feel motivated when their sacrifices are recognized by their agency and are more willing to have positive contact with citizens. Carr and Maxwell (2018) asserted that when officers perceive that they are fairly treated by their leaders, they have more favorable attitudes and reciprocate trust toward community stakeholders. Thus, while cohesiveness and teamwork are instrumental to promoting positivity and unity, resilient officers who also possess those traits are more valuable members to their communities.

Newly hired officers commonly enter the profession under the assumption that they are joining an exclusive fraternity of officers who are self-motivated and socially supportive of its members. However, there are several occasions where the law enforcement culture can cause officers to feel as though they are not supported. Junior

officers quickly develop a *working personality* whereas skepticism, mistrust, and suspicion of outsiders become the norm (Violanti et al., 2017). Officers find that their working personality is more desirable personally, so that they are not impeded by their personal friendships, should they have to enforce the law against someone that they have a friendship with. Ironically, the law enforcement culture can be substantively harmful to peer relationships. According to Bell and Eski (2015) the law enforcement culture is characterized by conservatism, suspicion, and pessimism which dually includes a strong sense of mission that amplifies stigmatization. Officers who are unaccustomed to the internal acrimony perpetuated by public scrutiny and second-guessing of peers and supervisors, often leave the profession for other types of employment. These divisive cultural experiences have diminished officer ranks and curtailed the enthusiasm of junior officers.

Elevated environmental demands and low levels of social support contribute to stressed officers (Brough et al., 2017). Law enforcement officers, like other citizens, often possess stereotypical views about mental health. The law enforcement culture can have a significant influence on how officers think and assumes a key role in peer relationships. Some officers become ashamed and feel discredited when they perceive that they are not living up to the expected standard (Bell & Eski, 2015). Instead of using a positive stress coping mechanism, officers internalize their thoughts and emotions. However, an officer's decision to distance himself socially can have serious ramifications. Hansson et al., (2016) found that low levels of social support were associated with poor health. Similarly, Violanti (2017) found that higher levels of social

support among officers, reduced perceived stress levels. These studies together suggest that officers need strong family support and social networks outside of the workplace.

A common complaint among municipal law enforcement officers is a lack of fairness in the promotional process. To make the job appear attractive, police recruiters often advertise the profession as having unparalleled potential, but after only working a few short years, officers discover that more challenging positions are not equally accessible to everyone (Deschenes et al., 2018). The hierarchal structure of municipal law enforcement agencies comprises a narrow top and wide base. Since growth is extremely limited for most, many officers retire near their same rank of entry after serving 35-40 years (Bano & Talib, 2017).

Another inherent stressor caused by the necessity of having officers available 24 hours a day, is the utility of shift work and long hours. Due to working extended hours officers often function with sleep deprivation. Insufficient sleep and limited stress management resources compound the severity of reactions to stress (Steinkopf et al., 2015). Longer working hours create a conflict for married officers and those who have children. In many cases, the needs of the family are left neglected because the demands of the job are often incompatible with the family's needs (Bano & Talib, 2017). Clearly, societal demands and organizational pressure to meet those demands, can have a negative impact on officers and their families.

Operational Stress

Over the course of a long career, officers are repeatedly exposed to unique demands and events that can be considered stressful. The common operational stressors

of a law enforcement officer include the dangers of the job, potential civil liability, exposure to misery, low wages, and isolation from non-law enforcement friends (BJA, 2018). Operational stress results from the demands of performing basic patrol functions (Wolter et al., 2018). During an officer's career unmanaged stress accumulates and can negatively impact officers in various ways. With little or no warning, officers can be exposed instantly to critical incidents which are known to manifest the highest individual stress levels (Violanti, 2016). Thus, confident resilient officers who possess viable personal resources are more likely to successfully manage operational stress and complete their law enforcement career with healthier outcomes.

It has been shown that daily occupational stress chronically affects officers (Rao & Singh, 2017). Moreover, operational stressors can seriously inhibit officers by slowing down their cognitive reaction to danger (Gutshall et al., 2017). The public's safety directly depends upon an officer's ability to readily process and react to circumstances. Maran et al., (2018) warned that patrol officers are more vulnerable when stressed in comparison to officers that have permanent office assignments. These studies emphasize both the importance of understanding how officers' environments impact their effectiveness and the need for evidence-based solutions.

Police work is demanding; therefore, officers must always prepare themselves mentally and physically, prior to arriving to work. According to Violanti et al., (2016) whenever an officer perceives a situation as stressful, several biological systems become involved to help manage the demand. Although, officers usually return to their loved ones at the end of the day, there is always a possibility that they could be killed in in the

line of duty. Officers also must contend with the demands of managing cumulative stress associated with law enforcement (Pitel et al., 2018). The innovation of new stress policy should not be overlooked by agency leaders. Rather than investing more funding in institutional services that historically have not been utilized by officers, key stake holders should develop more pragmatic policy that officers will consistently access (Donnelly et al., 2015).

Municipal officers must also overcome the pressures of not having enough officers on the street. A reduced workforce is very dangerous to the personal safety of officers who respond to serious circumstances at a disadvantage. Some officers have become frustrated because they cannot understand why their agency would allow them to be in such circumstances (Bano & Talib, 2017). Further, the stressors of legality issues in the aftermath of a use of force incident can be overwhelming (Violanti et al., 2016). Officers sometimes fear that their agency will publicly scrutinize their actions to create distance from them and simply to maintain the organization's reputation.

Effects of Stress

Long-term bouts with stress are common in career law enforcement officers because most municipal level agencies require that officers work at least 25 years of service to qualify for retirement. Officers must manage episodic stress, acute stress, and the cumulative stress of shift work over an entire career of service (Pitel et al., 2018). The gravity of unmanaged stress is serious because cumulative stress does not dissipate after retirement or even after leaving the profession earlier (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014). In a seminal study, Franke, Collins, and Hinz (1998) compared 232 retired male law

enforcement officers to 817 randomly selected men around the same age. Cardiovascular incidence was found to be significantly higher in the retired officer group 31.5% to 18.4%. In a related study, Gershon et al. (2009) found that among officers, the risk of mortality resulting from cardiovascular disease increased for each year of law service. Clearly, the research shows that there is a much higher ratio of CVD in law enforcement officers. However, these studies were conducted more than 5 years ago, and more recent research is needed.

American Heart Association (2017) studies conducted among the public indicate that there are also many individual risk factors that lead to CVD. These risk factors include hypertension, high cholesterol, smoking cigarettes, diabetes, obesity, poor diet, and excessive alcohol consumption. Moreover, officers with higher stress levels stand an even greater chance of developing CVD (Han et al., 2018). In a cohort study consisting of 860, 221 public officers Han et al., (2018) concluded that law enforcement officers were a higher risk for heart disease than any public officer group. Steinkopf et al., (2015) asserted that the life span of a law enforcement officer was significantly lower than the general population by a mean difference of 21 years. In other words, despite regional differences the characteristic pressures of law enforcement are a catalyst to ill-health and emphasize the need for key stakeholders to continually develop wellness policy.

The ramifications of operational stress can affect officers psychologically long term because they constantly respond to distress service calls where a calm demeanor and clarity in decision making is paramount. These life-threatening situations include exposure to graphic crime scenes, violent criminals, and helping abused children

(Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014). Officers are trained to manage the upheaval of their profession, but often maladapt to the stress that accompanies it. Therefore, constant demands of episodic stress can further foster mental ill-health and poor well-being (Wolter et al., 2018). Without proper stress management skills for circumstances continually arising at work, officers may become overwhelmed. Largely, it is estimated that approximately 35% of officers experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms during their career (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014). Law enforcement officers who experience PTSD are a serious risk to their community and their organization. Officers who have PTSD may re-live trauma, practice avoidance, become overly aggressive, suffer disturbed sleep, and exhibit destructive behavior (Violanti et al., 2016). Long term exposure to trauma without effective stress management mechanisms can lead to chronic mental health disturbances.

Long-term and acute exposure to stress can be linked to altered perceptions, loss of memory, and impact an officer's problem-solving ability (Gutshall et al., 2017). Officers depend upon their cognitive abilities to process on-going situations. An officer who is overwhelmed by stress, could potentially arrest the wrong person, and have problems recalling details while writing reports or testifying in court. Gutshall et al., (2017) examined 32 patrol officers, with 1-20 years of service, using surveys and a memory test. Over a 10-day duty cycle, there was significant differences in cognitive functioning, processing information, learning, and working memory (Gutshall et al., 2017). Senior officers reported higher levels of perceived stress with lower levels of resilience and job burnout (Gutshall et al., 2017). Indicating that after working several

years of service and observing no improvements in the way things are done, the senior officers likely resolved to accept conditions the way that they were.

Often the stressors of law enforcement are taken home with the officer at the end of duty. Officers experiencing high levels of stress are likely to shun family activities and instigate marital strife (Violanti, 2016). Without proper release of stress, family members can become easy targets of misplaced anger and frustration. The officer's working personality can be manifested at home by practicing autocratic demands (Karaffa et al., 2015). Any disagreement with a family member can be interpreted as a challenge to authority by the officer and considered disrespect. (Steinkopf et al., 2015). When officers cannot separate their working personality from family members and friends, social networks can be destroyed.

Maladaptive Coping

Healthy coping mechanisms may help an officer feel better immediately and provide lasting beneficial effects (Can & Hendy, 2014). Some examples of healthy coping are exercising, maintaining a healthy diet, and having a supportive network of family and friends. Conversely, maladaptive coping mechanisms can also help an officer feel better instantly but increases the risk of problems occurring later (Can & Hendy, 2014). Some examples of maladaptive coping include repressing angry outbursts, drinking alcohol, eating high-fat snacks, and over consumption of caffeinated beverages.

Stress management courses are not taught at police academies or listed among the in-service training curricula. Officers notoriously use maladaptive coping strategies that further lead to problematic drinking, internalizing experiences, disassociation,

overworking, and negative self-talk (BJA, 2016). Moreover, these maladaptive behaviors can be precursors to developing traumatic stress symptoms (Chopko et al., 2018).

Without proper training to manage exposure to tragedy and human suffering, officers help put in peril their own psychological health.

Officers can lessen the intensity of stress at work by seeking social support. Hansson et al. (2017) asserted that social support refers to positive social interaction between co-workers and supervisors. Officers that have strong social networks are generally able to buffer workplace stressors (Violanti et al., 2017). Conversely, officers that do not have the support of their co-workers and supervisors are consequently affected by poor mental health outcomes (Rao & Sing, 2017). Hence, Law enforcement agencies should recognize the importance of support from supervisors and peers by establishing programs that promote teamwork and unity.

Emotional coping mechanisms may increase the effects of stress on an officer's behavior (Anshel & Brinthaup, 2014). Alcoholism within the ranks of law enforcement has been a catalyst in many officer deaths. For example, following investigations of officer suicides, researchers concluded that alcohol was involved in 95% of the deaths (Violanti et al., 2017). The literature suggests that the law enforcement community encourages the use of alcohol, especially in the aftermath of traumatic events (Chopko et al., 2018). In their study, Menard and Arter (2014) found that 13.6% of male and 11.6% of female officers demonstrated problematic drinking. However, their studies' data was not generalizable to other populations due to mostly representation of older, Caucasian, male officers (Menard & Arter, 2014). Clearly, the research shows that alcohol is a

culture sanctioned coping mechanism used by officers. Thus, it is evident that identifying and correcting poor stress management mechanisms should be a priority.

The literature also suggests that allowing officers to self-manage work stress on their own is negligent, yet agency cultural factors sometimes are not conducive to the use of professional counselling (Rose & Unnithan, 2015). Law enforcement departments are known to espouse *I'm Fine* cultures (BJA, 2016). Thus, officers are indoctrinated in a culture where suppression is the norm instead of communicating when help is needed.

Law Enforcement Culture

The law enforcement culture is founded upon loyalty and cohesion created by officers through their shared experiences, hazards of the job, and authority to use force (Steinkopf et al., 2015). The law enforcement culture comprises the interactions between the officers, superiors, and other officers (Lambert & Steinke, 2015). From the start of an officer's career in the police academy, officers are socialized into a culture whereas senior officers teach new recruits the shared norms and values of the culture both formally and informally (Rose & Unnithan, 2015). The law enforcement culture plays a vital role to both new and senior officers. Senior officers help new officers become indoctrinated into the law enforcement community.

The social distance between officers and citizens facilitate the necessary vigilance needed to enforce the law. Because peer officers contend with the same situation every day, a stronger bond develops between those that understand what it takes to be an officer (Lambert & Steinke, 2015). Sometimes close relationships supersede operational policies and directives. According to Rose and Unnithan (2015) line officers tend to behave along

informal norms created by peers and supervisors and not formal norms taught at the academy.

The law enforcement profession is highly dominated by men. Traditional law enforcement places value on machismo, authoritarian, and action-oriented behavior which can be beneficial on the job but can be problematic with personal relationships (Steinkopf et al., 2015). Off duty and away from work, officers tend to socialize with only other officers. According to Lambert and Steinke (2015) Officers tend to be more comfortable around other officers, therefore they have a propensity to socialize with one another.

Although law enforcement can be an extremely stressful profession many officers do not seek intervention services. Copenhaver and Tewksbury (2018) argued that officers would rather practice individualism because they like to feel as though they are in control of their reality. Papazoglou and Andersen (2014) asserted that officers naturally abstain from seeking help when they are stressed because seeking intervention services is stigmatized by the law enforcement culture. Chopko et al., (2018) argued that officers would rather suppress their thoughts and feelings than risk the ridicule of their peers. Each of these studies overwhelmingly suggest the need for more practical stress management policy.

Institutional Services

EAPs and PEER support units serve a vital role to the psychologic health of municipal law enforcement officers. Employee Assistance Programs are designed to provide resources to employees and family members in cases of alcohol abuse, mental

illness, and marital issues (Donnelly et al., 2015). EAPs help employees develop viable solutions for personal problems that could ultimately impact their job performance and individual health (Milot, 2019). The primary goal of both EAP and PEER support teams is to restore officers to adequate functional levels (Steinkopf et al., 2015). Officers that use EAP and PEER support services, enhance their chances of successful outcomes.

PEER support teams are comprised of volunteer law enforcement members who have received additional training to assist their peers by providing a listening ear and making referrals for more specialized resources when necessary (Tucker, 2015). According to Southeastern Virginia municipal law enforcement policy (2019) members who converse with PEER support officers are promised confidentiality. Officers maintain 24-hour access to PEER support and may be referred to a mental health professional if more assistance is needed (Southeastern Virginia Law Enforcement, 2019). PEER support officers bridge the gap between their peers and mental health professionals and are more easily accessible than external healthcare providers (Hohner, 2017). Officers serving on PEER teams may be more appealing to help seeking officers than EAP services because police members share similar professional experiences. The shared bond between distressed officers and PEER members have been thought to facilitate empathy and trust (Carleton et al., 2018). PEER support officers help facilitate a climate of understanding by empathizing with other officers in distressful situations.

The law enforcement culture has not been able to overcome the stigma of those who seek assistance when suffering mental health disturbances. This lack of foresight has had negative implications for law enforcement agencies. However, little research has

been undertaken examining officer attitudes toward those officers contending with disturbances. Milot (2019) voiced concern about the stigma law enforcement officers have of other officers who ask for help. Previous research indicates that officers with greater perceptions of EAP treatment stigma are less likely to use institutional services (Milot, 2019). In many cases, officers who ascribe to mental health stigma develop self-stigma when they need support (Bullock & Garland, 2017). However, officers who attempt to manage stress on their own often do not formulate realistic problem-solving solutions. Bell and Eski (2015) emphasized the essentialness of empathetic leaders who can identify with the needs of officers dealing with personal crisis. Leaders who are cognizant of the workplace stressors of their patrol officers may be more likely to espouse programs that reduce stress. Concerned law enforcement leaders should focus on policy that is intended to alleviate stigmatization while strengthening the resilience of officers.

Southeastern Virginia municipal law enforcement has both EAP and PEER support teams. As noted, both EAP and PEER units are often left underutilized and neither are intended to train or develop officers' resilience to potentially stressful workplace interactions. Instead, Southeastern Virginia stress management policy is primarily designed to assist officers that have experienced a critical line of duty incident which may include a death, serious injury to a colleague, officer involved shooting, or another event that could impact an officer's psychological wellbeing (Southeastern Virginia Law Enforcement, 2019). However, the current policy lacks education for officers who are pressured by daily routine stressors of the job. Municipal law

enforcement agencies emphasize the common concerns found in the profession such as maintaining vigilance at all time while on duty, highlighting the necessity of wearing the bullet proof vest, and instilling the essentialness of good marksmanship. Yet, officers are left to self-manage the potentially deleterious effects of stress, on their own.

There should be more practical policy and resources for officers to help manage the stressors of the job. Even when officers use positive stress management mechanisms, they often do not include benefits offered from their employer (Lambert & Steinke, 2015). There is still strong fear that confidentiality will not be prioritized which could ultimately undermine future employment or unfairly stigmatize officers (Tucker, 2015). The cognitive appraisal and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) may provide a practical option that could be used by Southeastern Virginia municipal law enforcement to help develop personal resources for positive coping. Southeastern Virginia law enforcement could train officers to use the fundamentals of cognitive appraisal and coping to improve individual wellness.

Summary

Interest in research regarding occupational stress in law enforcement has garnered much attention. Law enforcement is one of the most stressful occupations because officers contend with both organizational and operational stressors. When officers lack stress management skills, they may suffer from the maladaptation effects of stress. Unmanaged stress can cause physiological and psychological health issues for officers.

Although Southeastern Virginia Police offers EAP and PEER support services for distressed officers following critical incidents, officers are not taught how to manage

daily routine stressors. Law enforcement departments should seek to implement more practical policy designed to improve long term employee wellness using the cognitive appraisal and coping theory.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In the preceding chapters, the current literature regarding occupational stress in law enforcement was explored. While stress can negatively affect various aspects of routine life, stress has also been associated with inefficiency and cognitive impairment among law enforcement officers (Gutshall et al., 2017). In this study, I explored more practical wellness policy options through the theoretical lens of the cognitive appraisal and coping theory. This chapter covers the research methodology used to explore the practical law enforcement stress policy in southeastern Virginia. In addition, the primary role of the investigator is discussed along with the research methodology. This chapter also explains participant protective measures, the data collection process, and data analysis procedures.

Methodology

For this study, I chose a qualitative research method to explore individual municipal law enforcement officers' experiences of stress. The goal of qualitative research is to find the meanings that study participants ascribe to their behavior regarding a social phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Qualitative inquiry enables researchers to describe experiences of real-world situations that cannot be conveyed by quantitative methods, whereas a hypothesis is tested for truth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative inquiry is interpretive, data driven, and does not require causal explanation found in quantitative research. Moustakas (1994) cautioned that examinations of human experiences should

focus on wholeness and meanings of essences rather than measurements and explanations.

In qualitative inquiry, research is conducted within the study participant's natural setting (Maxwell, 2012). Through qualitative practices, the researcher records and acts upon interpersonal and subjective environmental stimuli and reacts to any emergent data. The data were then analyzed using the researcher's descriptive lens. In contrast, quantitative research is rigorously structured and employs static, noninteractive instruments, such as tests, questionnaires, and surveys (Maxwell, 2012). Following qualitative analysis, researchers can develop transferability from a limited number of participant experiences while quantitative inquiry is subjected to the representativeness of observations and is used to generalize findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research Design and Rationale

A qualitative approach was deemed more appropriate for this study because it enabled me to analyze the descriptions of the studies' participants lived experiences regarding the stress phenomenon under the current wellness policy (Dawidowicz, 2016). Through phenomenological means, I transcended participant experiences by reducing those experiences into patterns and themes so that the collected data could be further transcended to groups who share commonalities with the phenomenon (Dawidowicz, 2016).

In conducting a qualitative inquiry, researchers report how participants view their realities (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), the primary purpose of qualitative inquiry is to determine what an experience means for the individual who had

the experience and to provide a comprehensive description of it. From these descriptive meanings, essences or structures are formed. In this study, respondents completed anonymous structured surveys to answer the following overarching research questions:

RQ1: How do officers in a southeastern Virginia police department perceive their wellness policy for reducing stress?

RQ2: What recommendations do officers in a southeastern Virginia police department report to improve the effectiveness of current policy?

In determining the appropriate qualitative approach, both phenomenology and multiple case studies in comparison provided an advantage of collaboration with participants in the field. Both methods involve data collection strategies such as completing interview questions, reviewing documents and archival records, physical artifacts, and audiovisual materials. However, phenomenology is used to gain a deeper understanding of a finite and definable phenomenon (Dawidowicz, 2016). Multiple case studies are used to examine variations within and between cases with the purpose of replicating findings so that researchers can predict similar results across cases or predict contrasting results based on theory.

Role of the Researcher

Patton (2015) disclosed that qualitative inquiry is personal, whereas researchers are considered the main instrument. According to Patton, the researcher's background, experience, training, skills, competence, field engagement, and analysis are pivotal to the overall credibility of the study. During this study, I obtained, organized, and analyzed the perceptions of participants. Prior to beginning, I bracketed my personal experiences,

biases, and perceptions so that I could not misinterpret participant perceptions of the phenomenon (Dawidowicz, 2016). Realizing the importance of the researcher role, I partook in candid self-dialogue prior to fully immersing myself into exploration (Moustakas, 1994). Prior to immersion, I determined that anything associated with the study, such as people, places, and nature, would be useable (Moustakas, 1994).

Anonymous electronic surveys containing a structured questionnaire protocol were completed by 15 municipal law enforcement patrol officers. The electronic format facilitated accessibility and enabled respondents to complete the survey in the privacy of their home or where work distractions were less likely. Qualitative research requires using epistemological assumptions; therefore, I obtained subjective evidence based on participant views collected in the field (Creswell, 2013). For example, each participant described their individual understandings of environmental workplace demands and how they coped to manage the conditions. Some officers found that humor enabled them to successfully manage stress even within traumatic circumstances, while others sought isolation and introspection.

Participant Selection

The effectiveness of qualitative research is determined largely by the selection of information-rich informants (Patton, 2016). Patton (2016) argued that information rich cases are those chosen by qualitative examiners for illuminating the issue of central importance. Purposive participants are deliberately selected in qualitative research because they are more qualified to provide insight into the phenomena being studied due to their own personal experiences (Saldana & Omasta, 2017). Purposive participants add

depth to research questions, providing understanding that cannot be provided by randomly selected sources (Maxwell, 2012).

The current study consisted of 15 participants selected using a purposive sampling method. Following approval from municipal law enforcement in southeastern Virginia, I disseminated emailed letters within the department's intranet system to invite potential participants (see Appendix B). Patrol level officers, which are below the rank of supervisor (sergeant), and those who had been assigned to a uniform patrol operations division for at least 1 year were invited. I sought maximum variation of professional experience from a minimum of 1 year to over 15 years, to obtain various officer perspectives.

Ethical Protection of Participants

The officers in this study were law enforcement members who volunteered to participate. In addition, respondents were advised that they could rescind their participation at any time during the process. There were no known harmful aspects to participation in this study. If a participant would have experienced adversity or harm during participation in this study, referral to the proper resources would have been granted immediately upon notice. Each participant reviewed an informed consent form delivered by email. All completed surveys are stored by an Internet vendor and protected by a password. Hard copies have also been stored in a locked safe at the researcher's residence. To maintain confidentiality, the collected data are not identifiable with participant names in the finished report. Participants were assigned an alias and a

participant number, such as Law Enforcement Officer 1 or LEO1, Law Enforcement Officer 2 or LEO2, and so on.

Procedures

The respondents in this study were active law enforcement members who possessed at least 1 year of enforcement experience and had volunteered to participate. Both men and women patrol officers under the rank of sergeant were invited. There were no known harmful aspects to their participation. After receiving approval, I disseminated invitations via the Southeastern Virginia law enforcement intranet advising potential participants of this study. Those officers who decided to participate reviewed an implied consent letter before consenting. Participants then completed an electronic structured questionnaire via an internet service provider. All participant data was safeguarded by storage in a locked safe and a password protected personal computer.

Data Management Analysis

In managing the data of this study, my main objectives were organizing and developing high quality data, documentation of completed analysis, retention of data, and storage of analysis after the study was concluded (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). I reviewed the answers of each respondent's survey for accuracy and alignment with the correct questions. During this process, I maintained specific focus on participant perspectives instead of my own (Dawidowicz, 2016). The following participant interview questions were used to collect data in response to the present study overarching research questions:

1. Please describe for me what you know about your department's critical incident/stress policy
2. Describe how you feel about using EAP or PEER support?
3. How do you define a critical incident?
4. How have you personally managed critical incident stress previously?
5. How do you define routine stress?
6. How do you personally manage routine stress?
7. Please describe how you mentally manage a stressful service call.
8. When you feel stressed how do you cope with it?
9. Please describe for me how you handle the social pressures of being a law enforcement officer?
10. Please describe from your experiences of how officers interact following stressful encounters.
11. How has your organization focused specifically on stress?
12. How would you determine when work pressure has become personally overwhelming?
13. What can your department do to further reduce stress?

I engaged in a continuous iterative process of transcribing data and coding.

According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) a code enables qualitative researchers to retrieve the most meaningful material and helps to combine similar chunks of data into analyzable units (see Appendix F). Saldana (2013) reported that a code is a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a salient essence capturing a portion of

language or visual data. After carefully reading the transcriptions, I determined code words for chunks of data using deductive coding categorizing primary appraisal (PA), institutional services (IS), emotion focused coping (EF1), and problem focused coping (PF2). As data were collected, similar codes were then clustered together to create categories of pattern codes (Miles et al., 2014). In circumstances where data were considered emergent, inductive codes were used to capture those factors. Theme development was derived from the interrelation of categories (Miles et al., 2014).

During data analysis, coding was divided into two cycles. The cycles included In vivo coding and emotional coding during the first cycle and pattern coding in the second cycle. In vivo coding was selected because law enforcement officers often use common police terminology and the ten-codes of their profession to make natural descriptions. Emotion coding was selected because the survey questions explored intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences, participant perspectives, and life conditions within the workplace environment. In the second cycle, pattern codes were used to align data with the theoretic construct, stress appraisal and coping. Pattern codes were derived from repeated behaviors, actions, routines, and conceptual explanations which enabled me to identify emergent themes (Miles et al., 2014). These themes were developed using a six-step thematic procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Prior to conducting any examinations, I communicated with the Southeastern Virginia Chief of Police via e-mail. The email content contained information regarding the nature of the study and a request for approval to include officers under his command.

After approval was obtained, I disseminated invitational letters to potential participants via email. This letter can be found in Appendix B.

Trustworthiness

The proposed research findings were verified instead of validated. In qualitative inquiry, the researcher seeks to achieve “trustworthiness” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In attaining trustworthiness Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested verification methods such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The trustworthiness standard was achieved by establishing truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality so that audiences could have full confidence in the findings. The following naturalistic methods were implemented in this study:

- Member checking, triangulation = credibility
- Rich thick description obtained from purposive participants = transferability
- Overlap member checking, triangulation = dependability
- Field notes, audio recordings = confirmability

Researcher bias is a concern in qualitative inquiry. The researcher is employed with a Southeastern Virginia municipal law enforcement agency. Therefore, an anonymous methodology was used to maintain the confidentiality of all respondents.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine municipal officers employed in Southeastern Virginia, for more practical wellness policy. The goal of this study was to obtain the understandings and meanings of the lived experiences of officers regarding the phenomenon occupational stress. In naturalistic research, the researcher

interprets human experiences of real-world situations that cannot be provided using quantitative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher is the primary instrument, and in this study, I employed anonymous structured surveys completed by purposive participants. I adhered to research guidelines as set by the IRB and obtained permission from Southeastern Virginia law enforcement to conduct the study. During the study, the confidentiality of the participants was protected to prevent identification. The research was verified to achieve trustworthiness by credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore wellness policy options that could help enable law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia to develop healthy stress coping mechanisms. The perceptions of 15 active law enforcement patrol officers were examined to gain understandings of their lived experiences obtained under the current wellness policy. Southeastern Virginia law enforcement officers currently have a PEER support team and a critical incident stress management team (CISM) that is staffed by peer officers, police chaplains, and professional mental health providers. The primary objective of these teams is to provide all employees with an opportunity to receive emotional and tangible peer support after a critical incident or assistance during times of personal and professional crises. The law enforcement agency in southeastern Virginia also offers mental health services delivered by licensed health care providers via an EAP and the police department additionally avails confidential access to the department's contracted psychologist who has an in-depth understanding of the law enforcement culture. The intent of this study was to answer the following overarching research questions:

RQ1: How do municipal law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia perceive their wellness policy for reducing stress?

RQ2: What recommendations do municipal law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia report to improve the effectiveness of current wellness policy?

This chapter provides a discussion of the results obtained from the analysis of the qualitative surveys. A description of the research setting and examination site is also included. This chapter will detail the data collection and analysis process that was used in developing the themes of this study. Finally, evidence of trustworthiness is presented to certify that the data are valid and representative of the experiences of municipal law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia.

Research Setting

At the time of this study, municipal law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia were using a new wellness policy. This wellness innovation placed emphasis on the mental and physical well-being of individual officers. Employees were being encouraged to obtain annual checkups and to prioritize their well-being by engaging in a regular physical fitness program to promote a healthy lifestyle. Additionally, selected law enforcement members were participating in parallel agency-led focus groups that were unconnected with this study. The focus groups' role in the agencies' wellness initiative was to evaluate potential adversity of extended shift hours for uniformed patrol officers. The results of the focus groups could lead to a possible reduction of hours from the current 12-hour shift. The findings of the focus groups when paired with the data and results of this study could enhance the quality of work–family balance for employees and improve the effectiveness of offered institutional services. In this study, structured surveys were disseminated electronically to obtain respondent understandings.

Demographics

Participants of this study were sworn full-time municipal law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia. The majority of participants (87%) identified as male. In order to better maintain participant anonymity and to better organize the data, each participant received an assigned identification code, LEO1–LEO15. Surveys were distributed via an Internet vendor to the officers of the participating southeastern Virginia law enforcement officer agency. The participants ranged in law enforcement experience from 1 year to more than 20 years of service. Seven officers possessed 1–9 years, two officers had 10–14 years, and the remaining six officers possessed 15+ years of professional experience.

Data Collection

Prior to the data collection process, I obtained the requisite approvals from both Walden University IRB (05-01-20-0518306) and the police chief of the participating law enforcement agency in southeastern Virginia. I then disseminated invitations to uniformed officers assigned to both the north and south divisions of the agency's service area. To do so, I obtained an internal active agency listing of municipal patrol officers assigned to both divisions. I then invited officers via the agency's intranet system who possessed a minimum of 1 year of experience on the job. Those officers who were interested in participating gave their consent after reviewing the informed consent form prior to taking part in this study. In alignment with prior law enforcement stress research, I developed the interview protocol and formulated the interview questions to align with the central research questions. Thirteen structured questions were listed on the survey.

Surveys were disseminated on three separate dates during the month of May 2020. Multiple dates were needed to increase the number of participants. I originally planned to use 12 participants. However, data saturation did not occur until there were 15 participants; dissemination of the surveys concluded at that point. Data saturation is achieved when no new data are forthcoming, when participant responses become redundant (Patton, 2015). Each completed survey was coded, analyzed, and interpreted. During this study, I followed the guidelines established by Walden University's IRB for conducting research with human subjects using procedures that ensured standardized ethical protection. I completed CITI training and obtained approval from Walden University (05-01-20-0518306) before any data were collected.

Data Analysis

I coded the transcriptions manually and analyzed the data using a six-step thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Phase 1 required reading and rereading interview transcripts to become familiar with each aspect of the data. In Phase 2, I generated codes that aligned with the theoretical framework of stress appraisal and coping. I also used NVivo and emotional codes based on descriptive terminology and phases. Emotional codes are used to capture participant emotions mentioned or inferred by researchers (Miles et al., 2014). For example, emotional terms, such as "frustrating" and "stressed" were recalled by participants as they described their personal experiences. A complete evaluation of the collected data enabled me to identify consistent patterns to be used for coding. Phase 3 involved searching for themes. In this phase, I used the codes developed previously to form potential themes in the data. During this process of

analysis, codes and similarities between different codes were used to form themes. The fourth phase entailed reviewing candidate themes for refinement. This refinement was facilitated by reviewing the identified themes and checking for potentially existing subthemes. The fifth phase involved defining and naming themes, in which I further refined the themes. Finally, the sixth phase consisted of formulating the results, which are revealed later in the chapter. Table 1 shows the themes that emerged in the data analysis process, codes that contributed to the themes, and a representative quotation from each theme.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) qualitative researchers should seek to establish reliability instead of the validity standard found in quantitative inquiry. I have been a law enforcement practitioner for approximately 23 years. Therefore, I am familiar with the police culture and the challenges to maintain secrecy by concealing perceived individual weaknesses.

Credibility

During exploration, I was cognizant of my personal assumptions; therefore, when external consultation was needed, I debriefed with an experienced law enforcement colleague. Credibility was gained through trust due to my long tenure and advancement in the department. Participants knew that their responses were confidential and anonymous. I bracketed my professional experiences so that I could further immerse myself within the culture. Immersion enabled me to ensure that I was not obtaining misleading information.

Transferability

In obtaining transferability, demonstration that the findings are applicable in similar contexts is needed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I provided a detailed description of the study's setting which helped indicate transferability. Descriptive information about Southeastern Virginia municipal law enforcement policy and procedures were included to support the findings in public safety organizations that share similar characteristics.

Dependability

Dependability establishes that the research's findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings were obtained through the consistent use of a coding system which included inductive, deductive, and thematic coding according to data analysis guidelines.

Confirmability

Confirmability pertains to the objectivity of the study. I remained objective throughout the entire research process. I used an internet vendor to collect the data. I then sorted and identified themes that were consistently recorded by the respondents. This systematic technique helped me to maintain objectivity and prevent the inclusion of personal bias (See table 1 – appendix F).

The next section comprises participant quotations which are associated within each theme in table 2.

Thematic Results

Psychological interventions are utilized in common wheel occupations such as public safety for the purpose of restoring personnel to adequate levels of performance

(Steinkopf et al., 2015). These services are often underutilized by law enforcement officers who attempt to avoid perceived stigma of weakness, fear being declared unfit for duty, or lack confidence in workplace interventions. In response to Research Question 1: How do Southeastern Virginia municipal law enforcement officers perceive their wellness policy reducing stress? The following themes found in Table 1 were developed:

Table 1

Themes, Codes Contributing to Themes and Representative Quotations From Themes

Themes	Codes contributing to theme	Representative quotation from theme
Theme 1: Acceptance of institutional services	Positive experience, judgement free, impressive, beneficial, reputable team members	“Having a peer support team is a benefit to all members of our department.” (LEO4)
Theme 2: Barriers to use of institutional services	Heard bad things, prefer my privacy, not confidential	“I wouldn’t use either one of them (PEER or EAP) because I don’t feel that they are truly confidential.” (LEO8)
Theme 3: Organizational demands	Court scheduling, 12-hour shifts, heavy administrative load, insufficient workforce	“Night shift officers work a 12-hour shift then may spend 3–4 hours in court consecutively.” (LEO2)
Theme 4: Appraisal	Preplan, envision the worst case, self-distance mentally, dehumanize the situation	“I simply take deep breaths and play ‘what-if’ games in my head.” (LEO6)
Theme 5: Stress coping	Dark humor, debrief with beat partner, accept things, prayer, friends outside of law enforcement	“I look at the big picture and focus on the fact that I have set myself up for success. I have no control over things I cannot control.” (LEO10)
Theme 6: Perceived areas for policy improvement	Advertise peer support, improve access to members of peer support-psychologist, increase supervisor involvement	“I think that if the psychologist just came around to visit sometimes, maybe even at a roll call then officers would reach out more.” (LEO7)

Theme 1: Acceptance of Institutional Services

According to the results identified under the theme of Acceptance of Institutional Services, many of the respondents were impressed with the resources that were offered.

A total of 15 respondents participated in this study: 13 men and 2 women. Junior officers

who possessed 1-5 years of service reported that they were more likely to use agency offered programs, while those officers with more than 15 years of service generally would not. This finding was consistent even among both of the women participants. The junior female officer had utilized PEER Support within her first month after graduating from the police academy. The senior officer reported that despite stressful environmental demands, she preferred to maintain her confidentiality. A few of the respondents had direct positive experiences with utilization of services, others indicated optimism because they were cognizant of reputable officers that were team members of PEER support. Furthermore, when asked to describe how they felt about using PEER support or EAP services, many of the officers responded positively.

LEO 4 said,

I have used EAP and it has helped me. As far as I know, it truly is anonymous and only a select few co-workers know I have used it. I have mentioned it to others when I felt it could help them. Having a Peer Support Team is a benefit to all members of the department. The biggest issue I've seen is identifying a team member who has had a similar experience that a member is going through. It's only fair to the member who needs some kind of support that he/she could speak with someone who has gone through the same thing.

LEO 2 stated, "I would not mind using peer support. I would much rather speak my mind to people that I work with." LEO6 responded, "I believe in the peer support team and have faith in all its members." LEO14 said, "I think peer support is a useful

program that may be underutilized by officers. Personally, I have never used their services, but I know people who have, and they were pleased.”

LEO 15 responded,

I am part of the PEER support team and feel it is a huge asset to the police department. I have seen it work numerous times and can speak from experience of it helping me. EAP is also an excellent resource that is underutilized. I feel extremely comfortable with both programs.

A cultural perception that law enforcement officers are superhuman, independent, and impervious to adversity can diminish the confidence of an individual officer should they feel overwhelmed by stress and need intervention. Therefore, even when officers use positive stress coping mechanisms, they often seek external resources instead of programs provided by their agency (Lambert & Steinke, 2015). Some of the respondents who were comfortable confiding with their colleagues were also more willing to use psychological services provided by both PEER support and EAP.

LEO 1 stated, "I've been fortunate to work with some great beat partners. We confide in each other and talk about everything. We even talk outside of work too and our conversations are judgement free. LEO 2 claimed, "After a hot call, we all get together in a big group and talk about it. I feel that it brings closeness. LEO 9 responded, "We have a strong bond on my platoon. The officers rally around each other. There is a concerted effort to make each other better."

The PEER support team may be referred to assist officers by the department in the aftermath of a critical incident or when officers have been exposed to trauma. LEO 5

said, "They [PEER support] came out to a traumatic incident that I was on once and I was very impressed. They followed up with emails and phone calls. I felt like they actually cared." LEO 15 responded, "I have seen peer support work numerous times and can speak from experience of it helping me. EAP is also an excellent resource that is underutilized. I feel very comfortable with both programs." LEO 10 stated. "We each have each other's back. For me, as a peer support team member I watch for certain cues to see if an officer is having a hard time handling a situation and if so, I reach out to them." LEO 9 said, "I found that I needed peer support a lot earlier in my career than I expected. Their help was beneficial."

Theme 2: Perceived Barriers

While many of the respondents were accepting of the available counseling services offered by their agency, others were skeptical. In describing negative perceptions of Peer support LEO 8 stated, "I wouldn't use peer support or EAP because I don't feel that they are truly confidential." Other respondents also perceived that their confidentiality could not be maintained internally. LEO 12 said, "I would use EAP, but I don't trust things to remain confidential via peer support." LEO 7 responded, "I prefer EAP because if I had to talk to someone, I would rather talk to someone who doesn't know me."

Theme 3: Organizational Demands

Administrative duties. Many of the operational duties of patrol officers are supplemented by corollary administrative reports. Officers are primarily responsible for completing electronic incident reports via a records management system, completing

electronic accident reports, accurately submitting body worn camera metadata, maintaining records of their working hours, submitting electronic use of force reports, mandatory online training and completing entries of enforcement throughout their shift via their in-car computer. In addition, officers must consistently stay abreast of their email so that they are aware of policy changes and other vital operational information. Difficulty with meeting the administrative demands were noted as a significant source of stress.

LEO 1 said, "I think that the administrative part of this job is the most stressful. We have to be a patrol officer and a secretary." LEO 5 replied, "I go home stressed when I can't finish everything. On most days I stay at work to finish because I don't want my name on a bad list when I come back to work." LEO 7 stated, "We don't have critical incidents all the time, but we are dealing with all the administrative stuff every day. A lot of it is just frustrating and time consuming."

12-hour shift. Policing requires 24-hour operation; therefore, the demands of family often become secondary. This obligation could cause officers to feel external pressure from home. Some respondents commented that the heavy service call volume, long working hours, and paucity of officers has increased stress.

LEO 2 said,

I think stress is highest among patrol officers just by the nature of what officers do and the schedule they work. Night shift officers often work a 12-hour night shift then spend 3 to 4 hours in court at the end of the shift. By the time they go to sleep, they have been awake for close to twenty-four hours; then are expected to

return to work 6 to 7 hours later for another full shift. I have developed sleeping issues that prevent me from getting a full night of sleep on my days off.

LEO 13 responded,

I think the extended shift hours are contributing to stress. At the end of the year ultimately, we may work less hours, but the bottom line is that there is a work/life imbalance. We are spending more time away from our families because they work regular hours and we don't.

Workforce.

LEO 14 said, "A lot of assignments that I have had in the past, I felt like we were understaffed, which makes the work harder with no quick fixes in sight." LEO 12 stated, "We have way too many citizen contacts with fewer officers. We are called even for civil matters knowing that there is nothing we can do about the problem."

LEO 2 said,

The department is extremely short staffed in patrol and the lack of manpower increases my stress because I often feel like I am on my own. When I first came to the department, we had plenty of officers and I could go to a call with sufficient back-up and have the feeling that we are all in this together. Now, the cold feeling of being on your own creates a lot of stress.

Court scheduling.

LEO 1 stated,

I'm stressed sometimes because I think about my job a lot when I am off duty due to the court schedule. I never really know for sure whether I have

juvenile/domestic court or not. We cannot check for cases in JDR [Juvenile Domestic Relations] on-line and we are getting show-caused when we are not there.

LEO 2 said,

Day shift officers get off late and put in 13 to 14-hour days and then are expected to return to work 10 hours or less later and put in another 12 hours of work. Those officers cannot adjust their shift to get adequate time off between shifts because the shifts are already too short staffed.

Theme 4: Appraisal

The category appraisal related to how officers perceived changing environmental demands as they responded to calls for service. Resourceful officers who relied upon their basic police training mentally managed demands without becoming overwhelmed by environmental circumstances. LEO 2 advised, "I try to remain calm and keep a clear head. I always think about the "what ifs." I found that proper breathing is the key to a stressful service call." LEO 14 replied, "I try to take a deep breath and separate myself from the call personally so that I can remain objective."

LEO 10 said,

I try to see the larger picture and whatever is going on isn't that big a deal. Also knowing that I am not alone in dealing with situations. More than likely I am not the first to be dealing with whatever issue.

LEO 13 stated,

I personally don't think I have to mentally manage a stressful service call. I always take a breath and think through every scenario I can to prepare myself. I then process every bit of information I can, thinking about training and safety, state law, and policy.

Law enforcement officers are often confronted by disparaging citizens. Stress naturally results from these demanding interactions. As a practical ritual in preparation officers pre-planned their initial action steps before arriving. Pre-planning helped manage fluid circumstances and alleviated stressful environmental demands.

LEO 3 said, "Often times, I play high stress calls over and over in my head. When everything is done, I think about what was good or what needed improvement in my performance, so I don't dwell on things.

LEO 6 stated,

High stress calls help put my personal life in perspective, and I realize that by the time I arrive on scene, the damage has already been done. For me, working a stressful service call is easy. Walking away from a high stress call is the hard part. It is difficult to move on to the next when you're still thinking about the previous incident.

LEO 5 said,

I try to forget about everything and just remove myself from the situation that I'm involved in. This calls for tasks like supporting the victim or speaking with the suspect. With all the adrenaline flowing, you don't get time to consider your own feelings on a call.

Theme 5: Stress Coping**On duty.**

LEO 2 advised, "The pressure on the job can become overwhelming when officers take work stress home. After a stressful call, I get with a group of officers and we talk about things. I feel like that brings us closer."

LEO 3 stated,

In my experience, officers are typically supportive of each other and take care of one another. There have been incidents in which officers tended to make judgements and sometimes make fun of how other officers handled the call, which I believe is unavoidable to an extent in this profession.

LEO 6 said, "I look at the big picture and focus on the fact that I have set myself up for success. I have no control over things I cannot control. LEO 12 claimed, "Some officers shut down completely after stressful calls, others keep things to themselves. They walk away or try to put up the persona that they are tough." LEO 1 replied, "We have a lot of former and reserve military officers. They don't talk about anything related to stress. They just don't talk."

Participants noted that while on traumatic incident scenes officers routinely managed their stress using unique individual coping mechanisms. LEO 10 said, "Most of the time, officers will just find things to laugh at that normal citizens wouldn't find funny at all." LEO 15 stated, "Officers will joke about things. I feel like this is just our way of getting our minds off the bad things that we have seen. I've also seen officers do their own type of debrief."

Off-duty. Each respondent coped with work stress in their own manner when they are off duty. Some of the methods varied between emotional and problem focused coping. Respondents who were married to other officers confided the demands of work experiences with their spouse. Many of the respondents sought social support from other family members.

LEO 3 said,

Typically, I can talk about the things at work that cause stress and just getting it out helps. If I feel like I can't discuss it, I write my thoughts out and getting it on paper can help me make sense of it.

LEO 4 stated, "My spouse is an employee here. She knows and understands how stressful the job can be. I do my best to turn off work when I am at home. LEO 10 advised, "I talk about things with my wife and I explain law enforcement situations to her. I have a strong faith and praying is important to me.

LEO 5 responded,

I have friends outside of law enforcement that I stay in contact with because I enjoy listening to a different perspective. I also try to limit the amount of overtime that I work and schedule things to do on my time off.

LEO 2 said, "I accept that I will have a higher level of stress than most people. When people point out that I am stressed, I just claim that they don't understand and never will until they are in my shoes."

Other respondents practiced emotional focused coping mechanisms:

LEO 11 advised,

Nowadays, society is very disrespectful. I've never seen things like they are now. My family does not approve of me being in law enforcement even still after all these years. Sometimes I'm so stressed that I have to take something to get sleep. LEO 6 stated, "I manage stress by physical activity and alcohol." LEO 14 replied, "Sometimes you see officers engaging in heavier than normal drinking, just to cope."

Research Question 2: What recommendations do Southeastern Virginia Police officers report to improve the effectiveness of current policy?

Theme 6: Perceived Areas for Policy Improvement

Participants identified problematic areas of Southeastern Virginia municipal law enforcement operational processes which could be improved through stress wellness policy initiatives. These areas included adjustments to the patrol work schedule, enlarging the role of the department's psychologist and supervisors, and easier access to PEER support team resources.

LEO 13 said, "I know that it is necessary to have officers working at all hours, but the 12-hour work schedule is a problem when you have a family. We need more time to be with our families." LEO 8 stated, "We are out here all day when we are working. We could use shift overlap that will give us time to work out, thereby reducing stress and likely improving our appearance."

Although officers rarely sought the assistance of the department's psychologist, respondents suggested impromptu or scheduled visits by the psychologist to the department.

LEO 3 said,

Officers might not want to discuss traumatic incidents right after they have been involved. There should be a system in place where the department automatically comes back to check on those officers later, because you never really know how people are personally handling those types of situations. When you don't have an outlet the pressure just builds up.

LEO 7 replied, "I think that if the psychologist just came around to visit sometimes, maybe even at a roll call, then officers would reach out more."

Supervisors are responsible for ensuring officer readiness prior to the beginning of each day. This task includes ensuring that officers arrive to work on time and are mentally prepared. LEO 5 perceived that supervisors should proactively have more personal engagement with their personnel:

LEO 5 said,

The best supervisors are those who go beyond their regular duties and at least attempt to see how officers are feeling. Just simply having a conversation with an officer can go a long way. I have seen times when stressed officers really needed a supervisor to show a little concern.

Several officers reported that locating support resources was difficult. LEO 4 stated, "I know that resources are found somewhere on our police page, but I have no idea of how to locate them." LEO 13 replied, "There should be a poster in each station that has peer support members names listed on it. Right now, you have to keep searching through the intranet to find the names and numbers. LEO 10 said, "The department needs

to push the resources that are available. We have important services that are basically still unused."

Psychological interventions are utilized in common wheel occupations such as public safety for the purpose of restoring personnel to adequate levels of performance (Steinkopf et al., 2015). These services are often underutilized by law enforcement officers who attempt to avoid perceived public stigma of weakness, fear being declared unfit for duty, or lack confidence in workplace interventions.

In this study, officers provided their understandings of what is considered a critical incident, and each also included their personal working definition of the terminology. Critical incidents can cause an emotional stress response which can compromise the safety and wellbeing of officers (Donnelly et al., 2015). Many of the respondents perceived that institutional services were offered by their agency only for those who had experienced a traumatic experience or were exposed to a critical incident that occurred while working. Respondents were asked to discuss their understandings of what is a critical incident.

LEO 2 said, "A critical incident is an event that bothers an officer mentally for a long time after the critical incident has occurred." LEO 6 stated, "I define a critical incident as any incident that *shocks* the conscience such as an untimely death, or any incident likely to bring about a high amount of stress to the employee." LEO 15 replied, "A critical incident is a stressful event, to one individual, group, or a situation that causes the body to react in ways that cannot be controlled."

Perceptions of officers understanding of the department's stress policy. All of the participants were aware that a policy covering stress and wellness existed for employees and were familiar with various types of assistance offered by their agency. LEO 6 said, I know the department has a peer support team that is accessible to all department members. The county also has EAP available and a police psychologist available to police personnel. LEO 14 replied, "We have different resources like EAP and PEER support. Supervisors are also taught about early detection; a method which helps identify those that may need counseling thru the officer's behavior." LEO 4 stated, "The department's primary source is peer support. They train officers to help other officers through their problems. LEO 15 explained "The police department currently has a team of trained officers, mental health workers, chaplains, phycologist, who all work together to help members through a stressful event. The policy goes into describing the roles of each member, defusing, debriefing, confidentiality, how the team is called out, and what exactly the definition of CSIM is."

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore for wellness policy which could help enable Southeastern Virginia law enforcement officers to develop healthy stress coping mechanisms. The perceptions of fifteen active law enforcement patrol officers were examined to gain understandings of their experiences under the current wellness policy. The research questions used to guide this study were:

RQ1: How do Southeastern Virginia Police officers perceive their wellness policy for reducing stress?

RQ2: What recommendations do Southeastern Virginia Police officers report to improve the effectiveness of current policy?

Results indicated that although most officers acknowledged that they would use institutional services offered by their agency such as PEER support or services provided via EAP, some officers expressed reluctance, citing confidentiality concerns. The data suggested that organizational demands involving heavy administrative duties, shift work, and court scheduling were problematic for officers. To adapt to these demands, officers used various mechanisms while attempting to manage their stress both on and off duty. Finally, participants suggested recommendations for improving the current wellness policy which included allowing employees time to work out, roll call visits by the agency psychologist, and an improved method of finding a Peer Support team member. Chapter 5 includes interpretation and implications of the results.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how law enforcement officers in southeastern Virginia perceive their agency's wellness policy. Through participant surveys, understandings were sought using the lens of the stress appraisal and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). I also conducted this study to obtain officer recommendations for more practical stress wellness policies that can assist with managing the unique operational and organizational demands of the police profession. As a law enforcement officer, I bracketed my professional experiences from this study to minimize potential bias (Patton, 2015). The results of this study identified perceived policy areas that can be considered for improvement.

According to the American Institute of Stress (2019), occupational stress is a powerful contributor to stress in adults. Across the United States, employees report that heavy workloads, interpersonal conflict with peers, and finding the right balance between family and work are the source of most stress (American Institute of Stress, 2019). Law enforcement officers are not impervious to workplace demands, yet they are entrusted to carry the burden of maintaining individual freedom in a democratic society. These demands place the health of law enforcement officers at a higher risk for mental health disturbances, job burnout, and diminished well-being (Maran et al., 2018).

In the past, municipal law enforcement agencies designed fundamental officer training and development strictly for performance proficiency. During the basic police academy, cadet officers are taught job specific subjects regarding criminal law, defensive

tactics, and emergency driving. A corollary rigorous physical fitness program is also paramount. After graduation from the academy, as officers begin their careers, they are left on their own to manage the stressors of the job. Previous law enforcement officer stress studies have indicated that stressed officers do not perform at their best and have trouble making quick decisions (Gutshall et al., 2017). Although researchers have explored cortisol and other biometric indicators of officer stress levels that negatively affect officers (Violanti et al., 2017; Walvekar et al., 2015) few researchers have conducted qualitative studies on the perceptions of law enforcement officers regarding their employing agencies' wellness policies.

In this study, municipal law enforcement officers completed structured surveys to provide their understandings of their agency's current wellness policy. The survey questions were derived from the overarching research questions, which concerned participant perceptions of wellness policy and their recommendations for policy improvement. The findings of this qualitative study were reported in Chapter 4. An interpretation of the results is presented in this chapter, in addition to the limitations and implications of the study. Recommendations for future research are also included.

Summary of the Findings

The six themes identified by the data were (a) acceptance of institutional services, (b) barriers to using institutional services, (c) organizational demands, (d) appraisal, (e) individual stress coping, and (f) identified areas for policy improvement.

The first theme, acceptance of institutional services, provided surprising and informative results. Most of the respondents reported that they would positively use

agency-sponsored stress programs. More specifically, officers who possessed 5 years or fewer in the line of duty stated that they would speak to a PEER team member if an overwhelming situation occurred. On the other hand, senior officers who held over 15 years of law enforcement experience were more likely to avoid any agency-sponsored stress programs. Theme 1 results provided illumination with respect to the perceived cultural stigma surrounding law enforcement professionals. The findings contrasted much of the research literature examining officer benefit avoidance for mental health disturbances. For example, Chopko et al., (2018) argued that officers feared ridicule and ostracism from their colleagues if it was discovered that they sought individual counselling. The literature also suggested that men generally are less likely to ask for support (Lambert & Steinke, 2015). That was not the case in this study. Male officers with fewer than 5 years of service were in favor of using the provided services. The previous findings potentially would have been replicated in this study if current wellness initiatives had not been recently implemented. Many of the respondents reported that they were aware of favorable wellness policy changes. Respondents perceived that their agency's mental wellness training, which was held during annual in-service, had made a positive impact within the ranks. These respondents were junior officers who viewed veteran officers' perceptions regarding wellness as outdated.

Theme 2, barriers to using institutional services, provided results that were consistent with previous literature. Officers cited individual concerns of not enough privacy or confidentiality. Parallel with Gutshall et al.'s (2017) findings, it appeared that officers in this study had either witnessed an occurrence where confidentiality had been

compromised or they had resolved to accept the social environment as they perceived it. While this group recommend EAP or PEER support to others, most refused to use these services themselves. Similar results were reported by Bell and Eski (2015).

From the lens of Theme 3, organizational demands, the data suggested that agency environmental stressors which include disagreeable court scheduling, minimal workforce, extended shift-work schedules, and keeping up with heavy administrative duties, caused the most pressure. This finding was in alignment with much of the research covering law enforcement organizational stress. It is noteworthy that participants perceived the current stress policy as available for only those who had been exposed to trauma involving a critical incident at work. Therefore, officers who may not feel that their personal resources are adequate for daily stressors, are either going to internalize their problems or must find an external stress coping resource. It appears that the routine stressors of organizational demands present more of an immediate need to train officers on managing the stress of daily police work.

Theme 4 appraisal includes officers who vigilantly appraised their environment during service calls. As officers respond to calls for service many reported that they engaged in a cognitive evaluation process which involved mentally planning action steps that they assumed will be needed to attain a successful outcome. During this process, respondents considered whether on scene circumstances presented a challenge or a threat to their safety. Once on scene, data indicated that officers did not think their way through problems but simply reacted to presented circumstances. Some respondents reported that they naturally do not feel any stress while handling common service calls like domestic

disturbances until much later, when they have driven away from the scene. Officers appeared to begin their stress management process while on scene of traumatic or stressful incidents. Several officers claim that dark humor was a common coping practice used to manage stress. Humor has also been found to be a prevalent coping mechanism among officers.

The fifth theme, arising from on and off-duty coping, presented coping mechanisms that officers routinely used. Officers felt that they were not adequately prepared for emotional stressors of the job while they were in the academy. It was also apparent from participant responses that debriefing was not emphasized in basic training. The data indicated that alcohol is commonly used as a stress coping mechanism. While neither participant reported excessive consumption, the literature suggested that alcohol is sanctioned by the law enforcement culture (Chopko et al., 2018).

Theme 6, perceived areas for policy improvement, as mentioned in Theme 3 officers recommended changes to the work schedule and reductions in administrative responsibilities. It was also suggested that the department's psychologist appear at roll calls annually and that personal sessions with the psychologist become an operational requirement for patrol officers. The data appear to suggest that officers would be willing to speak with the department psychologist under the guise of being directed to do so.

Interpretations of the Findings

How do Southeastern Virginia Police Department officers perceive their wellness policy for reducing stress?

In the stress appraisal and coping theory discussed in Chapter 2, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argued that people enter into a subjective appraisal process to determine whether presented circumstances are stressful to them. During this evaluative process, one considers their personal resources that are readily available. In the present study, participants discussed their perceptions of the current wellness policy in respect to their willingness to seek direct intervention. Although there were some participants who had encountered occasions of distress during their employment, they declined to use an agency provided benefit, due to a perceived barrier of low confidentiality. Benefit avoidance in this study among senior officers, confirmed knowledge presented in much of the literature on the subject. This finding was also found to be consistent among both female participants. According to LEO 3:

I was out of field training not even a month on my own and I didn't know what to do with the emotions that came out of me. This was the first time that I had been on scene and experienced a death like that. That's when I realized that it's okay to ask for help.

Many of the participants had also perceived that the current wellness policy was specifically designed for circumstances that concluded with employees sustaining traumatic experiences. While it appeared that officers have maintained vibrancy without the assistance of interventions, the data suggests that a dearth of positive coping mechanism for many of the environmental demands such as workforce shortage, extended shift hours, heavy administrative load, and inconvenient court scheduling may still exist.

In this study, some of the participants declined to use PEER support and EAP services due to perceived confidentiality issues. In their research, Bell and Eski (2015) asserted that officers who did not engage in organizational counseling support believed that they would be viewed as discreditable or inept because of their participation. This avoidance of intervention often leads officers to internalize their problems instead of partnering within social networks (Hanson, Hurtig, Lauritz, & Padyab, 2017). Parallel with Copenhaver and Tewksbury's (2018) research, officers in this study may also practice individualism because they desire to feel as though they are in control of their reality. This further support research asserting that officers often assume above average persona.

According to the Uniform Crime Report (2017) there had been 60, 211 assaults against law enforcement officers in the U.S. resulting in 17, 476 injuries, during a span of 1 year. Yet in this study, as in previous law enforcement operational stress literature, respondents reported that the dangers of their police role, verbal threats, and acts of aggression from the community, did not cause them much personal stress. Instead, officers contended that they were more pressured by organizational practices like extended shift work, court scheduling, and quantitative overload of administrative responsibilities, which also appeared to be their primary source of frustration.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argued that when individuals are not threatened or challenged by circumstances, the demand is considered irrelevant. In this study, the data indicated that operational stressors did not engender the amount of stress caused by organizational structures. The participants were confident with their personal resources,

professional skills, and training where physical enforcement was required. On the other hand, the data suggest that officers were highly stressed by organizational demands. For example, participants reported that their administrative duties were especially taxing to them:

LEO 11 said,

If you are not staying on top of your paperwork and other constraints, then there is a chance that you will be written up. Sometimes just the pressure of keeping up alone is more pressure than being on the street. When you are behind in taking care of your assignments, they (supervisors) are going to get you. That's the type of attention that nobody wants.

The administrative duties were perceived as overwhelming because officers concluded that they did not possess adequate personal resources to cope with the demands. Without cognitive/behavioral resources, officers are left feeling overwhelmed. This is where the restorative benefits of PEER support and EAP services could likely be used to help officers appraise their individual situation, make better decisions, and choose healthy stress coping mechanisms.

Research Question 2: What recommendations do Southeastern Virginia law enforcement officers report to improve the effectiveness of current policy?

In recent years, law enforcement professionals can be found among the top of categories that suggest maladaptive coping mechanisms are at use. Significant alcohol and drug abuse, suicide, divorce, heart disease, job burnout, and low morale are just a few areas (Violanti et al., 2017). As in this study, full engagement of institution offered

interventions designed to improve occupational health and minimize performance impairment of officers remain underutilized. When officers perceive that those interventions are inadequate, then the community and agency stakeholders must receive the services of individuals who may not perform optimally (Donnelly et al., 2015). Participants recommended improved work/family schedules, more opportunities for engagement with the department's psychologist, ability to exercise on duty, easier access to PEER support member listings, and increased advertisement of wellness resources.

Officers recommended more professional contacts with the agency psychologist via mandatory appointments and impromptu visits at roll calls. This recommendation could be interpreted that there may be an underlying psychologic need. Officers desire access to services without the negative social repercussions associated with counselling. The current policy lacks initiatives designed to train officers on how to cope with routine job demands.

As stated previously, Southeastern Virginia Police Department had already begun their own research of patrol officer work schedules. Their study includes focus groups with department members providing valuable data for consideration. Due to family obligations officers can arrive to work their extended shift already suffering from insufficient sleep. Without adequate stress management resources, tired officers worsen their biological response to stress (Steinkopf et al., 2015).

Police departments maintain public trust with communities by ensuring that their officers are themselves law abiding and practice integrity. The Office of Professional Standards is designated to ensure compliance of policy by each department member.

When an officer is the subject of an internal investigation, the investigative process can be stressful. In this study, officers perceived procedural unfairness sighting lengthy and random inquiries.

In light of these data, the theory of cognitive appraisal and coping could be used to help officers positively evaluate their circumstances and choose healthy coping mechanisms. While the officer recommendations for improvements would require systemic department changes to operations, officers could be educated with training that emphasize problem focused coping (Robinson, 2018). The training would teach officers to examine demands, develop a plan while measuring alternatives with respect to cost and benefits, then choosing and acting upon it.

Limitations

Although this study was carefully conducted it was subject to inherent limitations. Qualitative studies are dependent upon candid responses of its participants. Both junior and senior law enforcement officers volunteered their participation. Although none of the participants were under my direct command, there is a possibility that perceived power may have had some influence. Before initiating any examinations, I consulted the IRB guidelines for conducting research so that potential challenges were reduced.

Another limitation of qualitative inquiry is researcher bias. My experiences gained while employed as a law enforcement professional amount to over two decades. I attempted to bracket that experience from this study.

Recommendations

This study led to policy recommendations which further underscore the challenges that law enforcement agencies face related to the mental health of its personnel. Organizational support in favor of intervention services could go a long way with helping to reduce the stigma of weakness. If supervisors are espousing the benefits of PEER support and EAP, officers may feel that their agencies care about their well-being and share concern about their families. Moreover, meaningful research could be employed to study officer attitudes of asking for help when leaders promote services.

Future evidence-based research is needed to understand what factors influence officer decisions to engage in counseling services offered by their agency. The data of the current study indicated that junior officers are readily supportive of mental health services. A study could also potentially be used to determine what specific stress management mechanisms are used by veteran officers. The results could help administrators determine how to directly target them. Further research could also seek ways to protect the confidentiality of members, so that they are more willing to obtain needed assistance.

Implications for Social Change

The implications for positive social change could occur through provident public safety organizations that are determined to improve the health of employees via more practical wellness policy. The findings could also be a catalyst for the development of long-term solutions that promote lasting effects via bold leadership. Bold leadership may

empower those who were previously ashamed to lift their voice, while serving to reduce the cultural stigma of seeking support thru institutional counseling services.

In the next several years, police leaders will continue to face wellness challenges regarding the mental health of its personnel. Long-term solutions can be achieved through increased knowledge and engagement in workplace interventions via the destigmatization of programs designed for those who seek consultation for stress related injury. Those in leadership roles can receive wellness training so that they can become more familiar with the causes and correlates of negative psychologic demands. They can also lead efforts by becoming an unrelenting voice of wellness programs designed to enhance the dignity of employees.

A multipronged response to mental wellness needs should begin early in the basic police academy so that officers can become oriented to a department that recognizes and values the wellness of its employees. A holistic approach could be applied to teach officers' emotional resilience so that they are prepared to manage line of duty stress. Resilience courses could also help reduce performance impairment while inspiring a climate conducive with wellness. Performance debriefing after demanding service calls can also be included within the basic curriculum. Should debriefing become a part of basic training officers will likely continue to use it throughout their patrol careers.

EAP service providers should collaborate with police departments so that they are familiar with the professional characteristic needs of law enforcement personnel. Providers should be cognizant of potential problem areas common to officers, such as the law enforcement culture, confidentiality concerns, and suicide data. In addition, police

departments should use training videos and other media to increase the availability of wellness services.

To ameliorate confidentiality issues, those who wish to serve on the PEER support teams should be vetted through an official application process. For example, when an officer applies for promotion to detective or an assignment outside of uniform patrol, the promotional process includes an interview with managers and senior officers seated on the interview panel. A more rigorous PEER support applicant process could reduce confidentiality concerns while simultaneously improving team satisfaction, thereby increasing officer benefit usage, and building organizational trust.

Employee wellness will continue to be a legitimate concern for police departments during the next several years. Social change could be realized through provident leaders and policy makers who espouse policies that empower employees to seek help while reducing cultural stigma.

Reflection

In 1997, I became an employee with a southeastern Virginia law enforcement agency. Like many new cadets who attended the basic police academy, I was drawn to law enforcement by a desire to help people. I aspired to become a great officer who could heroically save others or maybe even a detective, who possessed extraordinary investigative skills. As the years went by, I partook in a continuous self-examination process. While I still enjoyed the challenges of law enforcement, I concluded that I could make more of an impact on society and my profession than I previously believed, if I could obtain an advanced education. In 2014, I enrolled at Walden University and

serendipitously discovered the term scholar-practitioner. As a scholar-practitioner, I delve profoundly deeper into the arena of evidence-based research by conducting my own study. Since I was the main instrument of examination, all my biases had to be bracketed. My personal experiences with participants helped solidify a strong resolve to advocate for those who previously were not heard.

A scholar-practitioner applies knowledge to real-life situations (Callahan et al., 2012). As a public policy and administration student at Walden University, I learned to conduct research and critique peer-reviewed articles, so that I could better understand the causes and the correlations of situations at work and in my community. With my newly attained knowledge, my purpose became clearer to me. As a scholar-practitioner my purpose was to explore a long-standing negative condition in the subculture of law enforcement. A condition that has indirectly contributed to officer suicide, alcohol/drug abuse, divorce, depression, and job burnout. I determined to become an advocate for officers who had suffered mental health disturbances and were ashamed to ask for help, due to fears of reprisal or other social repercussions.

Meanwhile, as a new researcher I was eager to get started conducting my own study. During my coursework, I had read topics written by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Moustakas (1994), and Patton (2015) among other notables. I also passionately wanted to solve the social issues that led to victimization, derision, and ostracism within the law enforcement culture. Nevertheless, conducting research the right way has always been primal to me. After determining the questions that I needed to answer would require a

qualitative approach, I was fully aware that any personal biases that I had would need to be eliminated first.

With over two decades of working in law enforcement, I had pre-conceived ideas that persuading officer participants to speak candidly about their inner-thoughts and feelings would be difficult. Law enforcement officers strongly want to model invincibility or at least project a superhuman image, particularly in the presence of colleagues. I assumed that there would be occasions where participants would attempt to withhold the truth, but I did not detect any deception during the study.

As I conducted face-to-face interviews, I began to feel an indescribable conversion into the scholar-practitioner that I had become. An endeavor that had begun as a capstone project, had suddenly transformed into so much more. I recall looking into the watery eyes of some of my participants and observing the pain and emotion that had apparently been hidden for years, as they gave their accounts. On other occasions, the humor was so palpable that I have attempted to relive those experiences by re-reading the transcripts. These experiences greatly uplifted me later when I struggled to code the data. I developed a strong resolve to do my best work in this study.

As I disseminated invitations to the study, I began to feel an indescribable conversion into the scholar-practitioner that I had become. An endeavor that had begun as a capstone project, had suddenly transformed into so much more. This experience greatly uplifted me later when I struggled to code the data. I developed a strong resolve to do my best work in this study.

Conclusion

Occupational stress has cost U.S. industries approximately \$190 billion in health care expenditures (Blanding, 2015). Public service workers overwhelmingly account for the largest portion of financial compensatory claims, due to their interaction with society members who are often inclined to be aggressive (Brough et al., 2018). More acutely, law enforcement officers are typically the first point of contact for citizens seeking refuge (Wasserman et al., 2019).

Municipal law enforcement has been found to be a difficult and stressful occupation (Pereira et al., 2017). Officers must manage the unique demands of their job deriving from their organization and enforcement practices. In addition, officers must contend with the associated realities of their profession such as low pay, high civil liability, low levels of social support, and negative public perception (BJA, 2018). Officers who do not manage their stress well are a high risk for negative physiological and psychological outcomes (Rasul, Stansfield, Hart, & Smith, 2017; Wolter et al., 2018). This may include higher mortality and morbidity along with stress related addictions (Han et al., 2018).

During the initial employment process, there is much emphasis on physical and psychological health of police applicants. Later, in the basic police academy, recruit cadets are trained to proficiently execute their professional duties and responsibilities. After the academy graduation, officers are left to manage line of duty stress on their own. As a result, law enforcement officers perennially have higher rates of suicide, alcoholism, divorce, hypertension, and stress associated ailments (Violanti et al., 2017).

Public administrators must ensure that funds are invested for replenishing the well-being of public safety workers. When these employees are at their best, the community is better protected. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to answer two over-arching research questions:

How do Southeastern Virginia Police officers perceive their wellness policy for reducing stress?

What recommendations do Southeastern Virginia Police officers report to improve the effectiveness of current policy?

Law enforcement agencies enlist the help of PEER support members and EAP service providers to help their officers manage the stressors of the job, however they are often underutilized. In this study, law enforcement was examined through the lens of the theory of stress appraisal and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Structured surveys were completed by 15 purposive participant officers. The professional experience of the officers ranged from 1 to more than 15 years of service. The data indicated that junior officers or those within their first five years of service would use institutional services. While senior officers preferred avoiding social contact with others. These data were found to be consistent among both female participants. Other officers felt comfortable using the counseling services of PEER support and EAP providers. While a few of the respondents chose not to use department counseling services due to perceived low confidentiality. The data also suggested that organizational factors such as inconvenient court scheduling, heavy administrative responsibilities, low man-power and long working hours were problematic environmental stressors.

Participants also reported that they rarely felt any stress from their operational duties but were pressured mostly by organizational demands. Officers recommended several policy improvements which included easier access to the department's psychologist and improved work/family balance.

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Appendix A: Letter of Cooperation

**Chesterfield County, Virginia
Police Department**

10001 Iron Bridge Road – P.O. Box 148 – Chesterfield, VA 23832-0911
Phone: (804) 748-1266 – Fax: (804) 748-6265 – Internet: chesterfield.gov



COLONEL JEFFREY S. KATZ
Chief of Police

April 27, 2020

IRB
Walden University
100 S Washington Ave #900
Minneapolis, MN 55401

Dear IRB:

I am writing to express my approval for the research study, "Stress and Wellness in Southeastern Virginia Law Enforcement," to be conducted with the Chesterfield County Police Department by the researcher Russell Granderson.

Russell Granderson will be permitted to email uniform patrol officers using their county email address to inform them of this study. Those members who accept the invitation will then be able to volunteer individually should they desire to participate by completing an on-line survey. I understand that the survey may take between 25-30 minutes to complete and can be done at work or home.

At the completion of the study, the researcher will present the study's findings with stakeholders within this department. I am fully aware that additional site personnel are not required to supervise this study. Furthermore, should an officer become distressed or request intervention as a result of completing the survey, assistance will be granted to them.

Sincerely,


Colonel Jeffrey S. Katz
Chief of Police

JSK/tjw

Appendix B: Recruitment Email

5/2/2020

Greetings Everyone,

I am seeking your help to improve our department by answering a few questions about our current wellness policy and sharing your experiences with stress at work. As you know our PEER support team and department sponsored EAP services have always been ready to assist officers in need. I am conducting a study that could potentially enhance those wellness areas and provide even more benefits to you. To participate, you must have at least one year of law enforcement service. You must also currently be at a rank lower than sergeant.

Soon, I will be sending more information about the study and an invitation to participate via email. Thank you, for your consideration.

R. M. Granderson
Southeastern Virginia Police Department

Appendix C: Survey Questionnaire

Stress and Wellness in Southeastern Virginia Municipal Law Enforcement

1. Please describe for me what you know about your department's Critical incident/stress policy
2. Describe how you feel about using EAP or PEER support?
3. How do you define a critical incident?
4. How have you personally managed critical incident stress previously?
5. How do you define routine stress?
6. How do you personally manage routine stress?
7. Please describe how you mentally manage a stressful service call.
8. When you feel stressed how do you cope with it?
9. Please describe for me how you handle the social pressures of being a law enforcement officer?
10. Please describe from your experiences of how officers interact following stressful encounters.
11. How has your organization focused specifically on stress?
12. How would you determine when work pressure has become personally overwhelming?
13. What can your department do to further reduce stress?

Appendix D: Provisional Coding Scheme

Research Question (RQ)	Participant's Response	In Vivo Terms	Emotion Terms	Primary Appraisal (PA)	Secondary Appraisal (SA)	Instit. Serv (IS)	Theoretical Framework (TF)
Overarching RQ: RQ1: How do Southeastern Virginia Police officers perceive their wellness policy for reducing stress?							TF1 Emotional Focused Coping TF2 Problem Focused Coping
Research Sub Question (RSQ)							
SRQ1: What recommendations do Southeastern Virginia Police officers report to improve the effectiveness of current policy?							
1. Please describe for me what you know about your department's stress policy?							
2. Describe how you feel about using EAP or PEER support?							

Research Question	Participant's Response	In Vivo Terms	Emotion Terms	Primary Appraisal	Secondary Appraisal	Instit. Serv	Theoretical Framework (TF)
3. How do you manage critical incident stress?							
4. How do you manage routine stressors at work?							
5. Please walk me through how you mentally manage a stressful service call.							
6. When you feel stressed outside of work how do you cope with it?							
7. Please describe for me how you handle the pressures of your civil responsibilities?							

Research Question	Participant's Response	In Vivo Terms	Emotion Terms	Primary Appraisal	Secondary Appraisal	Instit. Serv	Theoretical Framework (TF)
8. Please describe from your experiences of how officers interact following stressful encounters.							
9. Please describe for me a time when you converted job stress into a personal challenge?							
10. How has your organization focused on stress?							
11. How would you determine when work pressure has become personally overwhelming?							
12. What can your department do to further mitigate stress?							

Appendix E: Themes and Code Frequency

Table 2

Themes and Codes (Frequency)

Themes	Codes (frequency)
Theme 1: Acceptance of Inst. Services	Positive experience (5), Reputable members (4) Beneficial (2), Impressed (2), Judgement free (2)
Theme 2: Barriers to use of Institutional Services	Not confidential (3), Heard bad things (2), Prefer privacy (1)
Theme 3: Organizational Demands	Administrative duties (9), 12-hour shift (4), Court schedule (4), Insufficient manpower (4), Perceived unfair internal investigations (2)
Theme 4: Appraisal	Self distance (7), Pre-plan (4), De-humanize (2)
Theme 5: Stress Coping	Talk with family/friends (12), Humor (4), Accept situation (2), Prayer (2), Alcohol, Hobbies (2)
Theme 6: Policy Improvement	Advertise PEER support (3), Improve access to members/Psychiatrist (3), Improve work schedule (3) Enlarge supervisor involvement (2)