

1-24-2024

## **The Relationship Between Endorsement of Symptoms of PTSD and Perceived Level of Family Issues in Law Enforcement Officers**

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Falicia J. Jensen

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2023

Abstract

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Family Issues in Law Enforcement Officers

by

Falicia J. Jensen

MA, Walden University, 2020

MA, Brandman University, 2018

BS, Ashford University, 2015

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Foreign Policy—Crisis Response

Walden University

December 2023

## Abstract

A police officer's career is flooded with constant demands and high stress, so it is important to start the process of understanding how the demands and stressors affect the officer's family. The Power Portfolio was used to collect data at a National Suicide Foundation training on suicide from law enforcement officers. The purpose of this quantitative, nonexperimental study is to determine if there is a relationship between endorsed symptoms of PTSD on the Power Portfolio and the perceived problems with family relationships on the Power Portfolio. Archival data were provided by a small corporation that works purely with first responders. The independent variable was the level of perceived symptoms of PTSD as measured by the Power Portfolio. The dependent variables were the level of perceived family issues that the law enforcement officer was experiencing as measured by the Power Portfolio. Three simple regression analyses were utilized to identify relationships of significance between perceived PTSD symptoms, stress, avoidance, and family. The results indicated a significant relationship between perceived level of PTSD symptoms and family, and a significant relationship between perceived level of PTSD symptoms and avoidance. The implication for positive social change is the understanding of the effect that perceived levels of PTSD symptoms in law enforcement officers have on the family, which will allow for more resources to come forth.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents who both dedicated their lives to helping others, to law enforcement. To my parents: The two of you have made me who I am today. Your strength and dedication in life is unparalleled to any. Because of the two of you, I am doing work that I highly enjoy today. Because of the two of you, I am able to help so many others. To my sister that is independent and hard-working, thank you for humbling me and always being there for the girls. To my husband and daughters: thank you for giving up endless hours with me so that I may complete a goal in my life. Kyber, thank you for the late-night dinners, the endless amount of coffee, and always thinking of my health. Kaziah and Krimson, thank you for bringing me adorable drawings and sweet notes. Thank you for sneaking in and snacking with me or sharing silly stories. I love you, babies.

Last but not least, I dedicate this dissertation to all first responders and first responder families. It takes a special person and special families to be in and thrive in the first responder world. Know that there are people out there that understand and care. Thank you to all the first responders I work with. I hear the good and the bad. I am highly entertained daily. I love what I do, and I love the people I work with. Thank you.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to Dr. Jana Price-Sharps for continually helping me and pushing me as needed. You are a true mentor, and you mean so much to me. To Dr. Gfeller, thank you for helping with the research side of everything and always being so quick to do so. Dr. Kyle Villarama, thank you for breaking down the areas that I had a tough time understanding. Dr. J, Dr. Gfeller, and Dr. V, you all were truly pivotal in my dissertation completion; thank you.

Dr. Vanessa Nash, my colleague and best friend (best friend first), thank you for assisting me through the entire dissertation process. Thank you for listening to me vent about all the difficulties and continuing to tell me to get it done.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Law enforcement officers' (LEO) stress, trauma-related symptoms, depression, alcohol-abuse disorder, and medical conditions have been on the rise over the past few years (Price, 2017). The stressors that LEOs encounter while on duty has been seen to affect their well-being when off duty. Routine occupational stress that officers undergo is a strong predictor of posttraumatic stress symptoms (Conn & Butterfield, 2013).

Amendola (2020) found that prominent areas affecting LEOs are occupation consumption, emotional-based work, and family conflict such as stress, and the job culture. Due to the nature and demands of the job, LEOs can be hypervigilant, controlling, and authoritarian, though this can cause difficulties when it comes to the LEO providing and making meaningful connections with loved ones (Amendola, 2020). Due to the inherently stressful nature of the job, LEOs are left vulnerable to many harmful things including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Lees et al, 2019).

Direct or indirect exposure or witnessing of a traumatic event(s) or from learning of an event that happened to someone that is of significance to that person can cause PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Symptoms of PTSD are of many, including involuntary recurrent distressing memories from the traumatic event, distressing dreams, flashbacks, intense distress upon triggers, avoidance of reminders and thoughts of the traumatic event(s), negative emotional state, hypervigilance, irritability, reckless, difficulties concentrating and sleeping (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Many LEOs may find that their exhaustion, burnout, and stress are seeping into

their home life. As such, a LEO with PTSD may be struggling significantly more, causing a rise in family issues.

Family issues can occur when a job demands exhaust and burnout an individual, leaving a more depleted capability of dealing with one's family (Amendola et al., 2021) (Bakker et al., 2007). Burnout and exhaustion from work can seep over into family and work-family conflict (Amendola et al., 2021). Specific family issues found by Amendola et al. (2021) are difficulties with the LEOs rotating shifts, how the LEOs' frustrations impact the family, and the view that is placed on the family due to their LEO family member.

Understanding the possible relationship between endorsement of symptoms of PTSD and perceived level of family issues in law enforcement officers, could provide LEO communities with the knowledge needed to create change. Knowing if a relationship exists between two areas is the first step to understanding a problem. Shedding light on some causes of LEO family issues can create a healthy change that the LEO community needs.

## **Background**

Law enforcement officers have been facing the ever-increasing struggles that society throws at them. Without proper knowledge and self-care, traumatic experiences can take hold of individuals and lead to mental health conditions such as PTSD. Nearly a fifth of law enforcement have experienced symptoms of PTSD or complex PTSD, making PTSD prominent in law enforcement (Webber, 2019).

Studies have shown that 90% of LEOs have experienced trauma (Webber, 2019). For those who were not experiencing the full symptoms of PTSD, it was expressed that there was a great struggle with anxiety and sleep (Webber, 2019). In 2018, a study revealed that 34% of police officers experience distressing PTSD symptoms, and 30% of police officers met criteria for a PTSD diagnosis or displayed clinically significant PTSD symptoms, which shows a clear increase of LEOs experiencing PTSD symptoms from 2018 to 2019 (Chopko et al, 2018).

Stress is a large factor in PTSD and for the family of LEOs. Law enforcement officers experience stress bursts, which is when a large stressor is experienced in a burst (Horan, 2012). When an officer responds to a critical incident call or life endangering call, they are likely to experience a stress burst along with trauma. Over time stress and trauma can cause many difficulties for the officer such as irritability, lack of communication, and lack of sleep (Horan, 2012). LEO families often receive the spillover from these officers that are experiencing stress bursts and trauma. Negative coping skills can be acquired over time and for families, can often mean that the LEO avoids going home in an attempt to cause less turmoil within the family system (Horan, 2012).

Personal relationships have been shown to intertwine with the impact of PTSD symptoms. Officers commonly engage in maladaptive coping mechanisms such as decreasing communication with their spouses (Chopko et al, 2018). Officers decreasing communication with spouses can lead to marital discord which can increase the stress that the officer is under (Chopko et al, 2018). Many times, the demands of the LEO's career spills over into their personal life, leaving the spouses often feeling frustrated, and

like they are a single parent (Horan, 2012). Although Horan's article on how police officers communicate in romantic relationships is older, it is very relevant to this study.

A LEO's stress and level of PTSD related symptoms do not just affect the LEO and the LEO's spouse, but any children they have as well. Comer et al. (2014) found that children of first responders are at high risk of having mental health issues. Children who have law enforcement parents or family members were found to be significantly more aware of law enforcement presence, have a significantly higher amount of insight and experience with the crisis, and have a significantly higher amount of interaction with law enforcement regarding the crisis during the Boston Marathon manhunt, than children with non-law enforcement parents or relatives (Comer et al., 2014). Comer et al. found that there is an effect on LEO kids that is significantly different than non-LEO kids. Although the Boston Marathon manhunt was high profile, there are still countless crisis that LEOs encounter throughout their workweek that could have a significant effect on their household. Mental health issues including PTSD are more likely among children with LEO parents or family.

Historically speaking, LEOs have expressed difficulties with returning home to their families after policing, shift work being difficult on their spouses, the LEO's frustrations impacting the family, and how society views a LEO family (Amendola et al., 2021). The pattern continues with the most recent crisis among first responders, COVID-19. Throughout the pandemic, first responders have been working tirelessly while the families watch from the home front. Families now continue to worry about the safety of their LEO, and the LEO's health (Zhiling, et al 2020). The LEOs are still struggling with

shift work, an immense amount of stress, and a significant lack of sleep (Zhiling, et al., 2020).

### **The Gap**

There is clearly a pattern of struggles that have followed LEOs and LEO families throughout the years, though very few research has been done on the effect that a LEO's job has on their family, much less how that effect is altered by the LEO's perceived amount and severity of PTSD symptoms. The issue the LEO's and their families face is repeated lightly in many studies, but never on a large enough scale to create impact and understanding. There is a definite gap in the literature when it comes to understanding a LEO's well-being and its effect on their family.

This study is needed to close the gap of information and to afford LEO's and LEO agencies a chance to understand the inner workings and effects of mental health on the officer and the family.

### **Problem Statement**

LEOs are exposed to situations that put them at a significantly higher risk for mental health issues (Stanley et al., 2016). Law enforcement officers see numerous difficult situations on a given day and are regularly put into high-stress situations. Kyron et al. (2019) found that 40% of stress-related behaviors for first responders were related to work. Work-life and family life are significant domains in life and experiences from either side can seep over into the other (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). One of the effects of this kind of work is the onset of mental health disorders.

PTSD is a trauma related disorder that includes symptoms such as intrusions, negative effects in cognition and mood, and sense of threat (Hyland et al., 2018).

Research has suggested that PTSD develops and is maintained by the processing that an individual does after a traumatic event (Weathers et al., 2018). Chopko et al. (2018) noted that numerous studies have found that 30% of police officers have reported clinically significant symptoms for PTSD. The PTSD symptoms that the police officers struggle with profoundly affects their co-workers, friends, and family (Lennie, 2018; Miller, 2007). Work-life stress in law enforcement may seep over into their family life where other issues may arise. Police officers that are experiencing increased stress from work are likely to have a higher negative pattern of emotional responses during interactions with their spouse (Roberts & Levenson, 2001).

Law enforcement officer's kids can be influenced by their parents' job. Kids of police officers may experience more restrictions in their activities than other kids. Some restrictions that a LEO's kid may experience are early curfews, restrictions on what friends they are allowed to have, not being allowed to go to friend's houses, and not being allowed to have social media accounts. Children of law enforcement may have less access to their parents due to work schedules which include missing holidays, birthdays, and other family events. Also, children of law enforcement officers may be bullied at school because they have apparent in law enforcement (Miller, 2007).

This study needs to be done to bring awareness to an area that is lacking in literature and greatly affects law enforcement officers, their families, and society. The goal of this study is to close the gap in the literature by beginning to determine if there is



a relationship between endorsed symptoms of PTSD on the Power Portfolio and the perceived problems with family relationships on the Power Portfolio. The information gathered from this study can bring awareness to the struggles that officers and their families are experiencing and develop a way to combat these issues.

This study will be quantitative and nonexperimental. The data will be provided by a nonprofit in Central California and will be archival in nature. The data will be drawn from data collected for a larger study on stress in law enforcement. Only the data points requested will be made available by the nonprofit. The data will be shared through a password protected EXCEL spreadsheet. No identifying information will be provided. The Power Portfolio was used to collect data from law enforcement officers attending a National Suicide Foundation training on Suicide.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine whether there is a relationship between endorsement of symptoms of PTSD and perceived level of family issues in law enforcement officers, utilizing the Power Portfolio survey. The independent variable will be level of perceived symptoms of PTSD as measured by the Power Portfolio. The dependent variables are the level of perceived family issues that the law enforcement officer is experiencing as measured by the Power Portfolio. Archival data will be utilized to assess whether there is relationship between a law enforcement officer's endorsed symptom of PTSD and family issues.

## Research Questions

Research Question 1: Does the level of perceived family issues have a predictive linear relationship with endorsement of PTSD symptoms as measured by the Power Portfolio?

$H_01$ : There is not a predictive relationship with endorsement of PTSD symptoms as measured by the Power Portfolio.

$H_a1$ : There is a predictive relationship with endorsement of PTSD symptoms as measured by the Power Portfolio.

Research Question 2: Does the level of endorsed PTSD symptoms affect the officer's likelihood to avoid family?

$H_02$ : There is no relationship between the level of endorsed PTSD symptoms effect and the officer's likelihood to avoid family.

$H_a2$ : There is a relationship between the level of endorsed PTSD symptoms effect and the officer's likelihood to avoid family.

Research Question 3: Does the level of perceived PTSD symptoms have a predictive linear relationship with the officer's family's stress surrounding their job?

$H_03$ : There is no relationship between the level of perceived PTSD symptoms and the officer's family's stress surrounding their job.

$H_a3$ : There is a relationship between the level of perceived PTSD symptoms and the officer's family's stress surrounding their job.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study's theoretical framework is Albert Bandura's social learning theory, otherwise known as social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory strives to understand and explain the development of behavior, how behavior is reinforced and continued, and how behavior can be shaped (Wulfert, 2019).

Understanding how behavior is developed and maintained is critical in knowing how to shape a behavior into the desired outcome. This theory will help to show if there is a relationship between work, PTSD, and family problems. Bandura's social learning theory will be used to develop a better understanding of how PTSD, which includes numerous behaviors, may impact the overall family relationship. This theory looks at the deciding factors of the behavior taking place and how those behaviors occur (Bandura, 1977; Wulfert, 2019). The officer's family, support, and family connectedness can have a significant positive or negative effect on the officer's behavior, maintained behavior, and ability to shape their behavior (McDevitt, 2020). Although an officer's family and support system can positively impact the officer, many officers choose not to express intimacy or put effort into their personal relationships (Chopko, 2018). The level of perceived PTSD symptoms may result in a range of behaviors that further affects their family life. Bandura's social learning theory (1977) will be used to better understand the relationship police officers who endorse symptoms of PTSD and their perceived relationship to their family.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study will utilize a quantitative research design to determine whether there is a relationship between law enforcement officers' endorsement of symptoms of PTSD and perceived family issues as measured by the Power Portfolio. The data will be archival in nature. The data will be provided by a California nonprofit agency. The data was collected as part of a large research study on law enforcement stress. There are 100 participants available for this study. Participants included local, state, and federal law enforcement officers. The participants for the original study were attending a class on officer suicide through the National Police Suicide Foundation. The data will be provided by the non-profit in a password protected EXCEL spreadsheet. For the confidentiality and safety of the participants, all identifying information will be removed prior to being provided for this study.

### **Definitions**

This section is utilized to define the terms and acronyms used throughout this dissertation to ensure understanding for readers.

*Coping skills:* intentional thoughts and behaviors utilized to aid in the management of external and internal stress inducing situations (Algorani & Gupta, 2023).

*Crisis:* An event that induces or produces a harmful situation with effect on a person, community, society, or the planet (Hahn, 2023).

*Critical incident:* A nontypical situation or event that generally brings forth direct or indirect distress (Dziak, 2023).

*Distress:* The negative stress response that typically involves a negative affect and physiological reactivity due to being overwhelmed, experiencing perceived threats, or experiencing loss (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

*Personal Observation Wellness Evaluation Report (POWER) Portfolio:* An assessment containing a total of 109 self-report items specifically designed to assess the risk and protective factors of law enforcement professionals including anger, anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), concentration, depression, dissociation/PTSD, family problems, impulsivity, mania, panic attacks, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation.

*Post traumatic stress disorder:* A stress and trauma-related disorder that is the result of direct or indirect exposure to actual or perceived death, injury, or sexual or emotional violence tied with the persistent difficulties that negatively impacts an individual's ability to engage in their daily lives (Piotrowski & Range, 2022).

*Stress:* The psychological or physiological response to external or internal stressors (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

*Trauma:* A disturbing experience resulting in significant feelings of confusion, dissociation, fear, helplessness, or other feelings that are disruptive and intense enough to garnish long-lasting negative effects on a person's general functioning (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

### **Assumptions**

The assumptions I held with this study were that all participants were forthcoming on honest in the answering of the questionnaire. I assumed that all participating

individuals worked for law enforcement agencies in various roles. My final assumption was that majority of the participants had families.

### **Delimitations**

The participants that participated in the Power Portfolio were attending a training on police officer suicide and volunteered to attend the original training. Because of the specific environment that the participants were in, the data represented may not be a true representation of the police culture in its entirety, though more so a representation of a subsection. The data was collected during breaks at a training put on by the National Police Suicide Foundation. Due to the environment in which the data was collected, the participants may have felt uncomfortable. It is not recommended that this data be generalized across the law enforcement culture as a whole. The data was self-report, which faces its own set of limitations. Self-report assessments are open to interpretation, biases, exaggeration, and minimization.

### **Limitations**

There were numerous limitations to this study that could have potentially affected the outcome of the study. The original data collection process was done without my presence. The data was collected during a training conducted by the National Police Suicide Foundation. The participants completed the questionnaire in a large classroom setting, which may have affected their ability to have clarity and honesty in their responses. Participants may have also felt uncomfortable with some of the questions, further affecting their ability to respond honestly. The accuracy and honesty of participant responses may have been affected. Lastly, due to the data collection taking

place during a training, the limitation of the participation pool may have affected the ability to generalize the results of this study.

### **Significance of Study**

There have been several studies addressing PTSD symptoms in law enforcement, though very little research has been done on the effect of perceived PTSD symptoms in law enforcement officers and their families. Miller (2007) and Lennie (2018) both found that PTSD symptoms can have a profound effect on the officer's co-workers, friends, and family. Chopko et al. (2018) found that 30% of law enforcement officers have clinically significant symptoms of PTSD. The research on PTSD in law enforcement and the symptoms of PTSD have been significantly noted, though the correlation between PTSD symptoms and family issues have not yet been adequately addressed. Working in law enforcement has been found to be extremely stressful. Stress has a strong correlation with PTSD in law enforcement; the higher the reported work stress, the higher the PTSD symptoms are reported (Violanti et al, 2018). The research on PTSD symptoms in law enforcement and the effects of PTSD symptoms are highly researched, leading to the clear need to further research the relationship between the two.

The rates of PTSD symptoms being reported amongst law enforcement officers is significantly high as is, although, the limitations in Chopko et al. (2018) study clearly states that the participants were pooled in convenience. There were a number of law enforcement officers that opted out of the study, meaning that the current 30% reported rate of PTSD symptoms could be higher or lower (Chopko et al, 2018). Therefore, as

stands there is a need to research the relationship between the perceived PTSD symptoms and the effect on law enforcement officer's families.

### **Summary**

This chapter's focus was on introducing the current study, whether relationship between law enforcement officers' endorsement of symptoms of PTSD and perceived family issues as measured by the Power Portfolio. All data being used for this study was collected by a nonprofit company that works closely with law enforcement officers and their families. This chapter identified and explored the independent and dependent variables that were used in this study. This study will hopefully create awareness for LEO departments, LEOs, LEO families, mental health providers, and researchers to further understand how the endorsement of PTSD symptoms can affect the officer and their families. In the next chapter, relevant research literature will be outlined to provide the necessary information needed for the current study.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

It is no secret that LEOs have been long known to be under a unique and significant amount of strain and stress in their job (Silver et al., 2017). On top of the physical risk that LEOs are constantly exposed to, LEOs are also exposed to situations that put them at a significantly higher risk for mental health issues (Stanley et al, 2016). Law enforcement officers see many crises situations on a given day and are regularly put into high-stress situations. Kyron et al. (2019) found that 40% of stress-related behaviors for first responders were related to work. Work-life and family life are significant domains in life and experiences from either side can seep over into the other (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). One of the effects of this kind of work is the onset of mental health disorders.

PTSD is a trauma related disorder that includes symptoms such as intrusions, negative effects in cognition and mood, and sense of threat (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) (Hyland et al, 2018). Researchers have suggested that PTSD develops and is maintained by the processing that an individual does after a traumatic event (Weathers et al, 2018). Chopko et al. (2018) noted that numerous studies have found that 30% of police officers have reported clinically significant symptoms for PTSD. The PTSD symptoms that the police officers struggle with profoundly affects their coworkers, friends, and family (Lennie, 2018; Miller, 2007). Work-life stress in law enforcement may seep over into their family life where other issues may arise. Police officers that are

experiencing increased stress from work are likely to have a higher negative pattern of emotional responses during interactions with their spouse (Roberts & Levenson, 2001).

Law enforcement officer's kids can be influenced by their parents' job. Kids of police officers may experience more restrictions in their activities than other kids. Some restrictions that a law enforcement kid may experience are early curfews, restrictions on what friends they are allowed to have, not being allowed to go to friend's houses, and not being allowed to have social media accounts. Children of law enforcement may have less access to their parents due to work schedules which include missing holidays, birthdays, and other family events. Also, children of law enforcement officers may be bullied at school because they have a parent-in-law enforcement (Miller, 2007).

### **Problem Statement**

LEO are exposed to situations that put them at a significantly higher risk for mental health issues (Stanley et al., 2016). Law enforcement officers see many crises situations on a given day and are regularly put into high-stress situations. Kyron et al. (2019) found that 40% of stress-related behaviors for first responders were related to work. Work-life and family life are significant domains in life and experiences from either side can seep over into the other (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). One of the effects of this kind of work is the onset of mental health disorders.

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This study needs to be done to bring awareness to an area that is lacking in literature and greatly affects law enforcement officers, their families, and society. The goal of this study is to close the gap in the literature by beginning to determine if there is a relationship between endorsed symptoms of PTSD on the Power Portfolio and the perceived problems with family relationships on the Power Portfolio. The information gathered from this study can bring awareness to the struggles that officers and their families are experiencing and develop a way to combat these issues.

This study will be quantitative and nonexperimental. The data will be provided by a non-profit in Central California and will be archival in nature. The data will be drawn from data collected for a larger study on stress in law enforcement. Only the data points requested will be made available by the nonprofit. The data will be shared through a password protected EXCEL spreadsheet. No identifying information will be provided. The Power Portfolio was used to collect data from law enforcement officers attending a National Suicide Foundation training on Suicide.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to determine whether there is a relationship between endorsement of symptoms of PTSD and perceived level of family issues in law enforcement officers, utilizing the Power Portfolio survey. The independent variable will be the level of perceived symptoms of PTSD as measured by the Power Portfolio. The dependent variables are the level of perceived family issues that the law enforcement officer is experiencing as measured by the Power Portfolio. Archival data will be utilized to assess whether there is relationship between a law enforcement officer's endorsed symptom of PTSD and family issues.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The primary source for relevant articles used for this study was the Walden University Library. Google scholar was a secondary source used to find relevant articles. Thoreau was used to locate peer-reviewed articles, and scholarly journals largely published within the last five-years. Articles used that are older than five years are used to explain the theoretical foundation of this study. The following contains the search

terms used to locate articles for the current study: *Law enforcement officers, police, cops, LEO, post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, PTSD symptoms, stress, trauma, accumulative trauma, anxiety, sleep, quality of sleep, lack of sleep, coping, coping mechanisms, police culture, law enforcement culture, first responders, first responder culture, law enforcement families, law enforcement family, police family, police spouses, police kids, cop families, cop spouses, cop kids, law enforcement family stressors, police family stressors, cop family stressors, fatigue, occupational stress, occupational demands, Bandura, and social learning theory*. The listed terms were used individually and in combination to locate the articles needed for this study.

The literature review includes the databases used, search strategies and terms, years included in the search, and strategies utilized to collect relevant research articles to the study. Included in the literature review is the theoretical foundation, variables and concepts used, as well as relevant research to the study.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

This study's theoretical framework is Albert Bandura's social learning theory, otherwise known as social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory strives to understand and explain the development of behavior, how behavior is reinforced and continued, and how behavior can be shaped (Wulfert, 2019).

Understanding how behavior is developed and maintained is critical in knowing how to shape a behavior into the desired outcome. This theory will help to show if there is a relationship between work, PTSD, and family problems. Bandura's social learning theory will be used to develop a better understanding of how PTSD, which includes numerous

behaviors, may impact the overall family relationship. This theory looks at the deciding factors of the behavior taking place and how those behaviors occur (Bandura, 1977; Wulfert, 2019). The officer's family, support, and family connectedness can have a significant positive or negative effect on the officer's behavior, maintained behavior, and ability to shape their behavior (McDevitt, 2020). Although an officer's family and support system can positively impact the officer, many officers choose not to express intimacy or put effort into their personal relationships (Chopko, 2018). The level of perceived PTSD symptoms may result in a range of behaviors that further affects their family life. Bandura's social learning theory (1977) will be used to better understand the relationship police officers who endorse symptoms of PTSD and their perceived relationship to their family.

Bandura's social learning theory (1977) has been used in other studies looking at PTSD, the symptoms of PTSD, and effects of the symptoms of PTSD. Cooper et al. (2020) conducted a study on the impact of family violence, PTSD symptoms and mother-child interactions. Cooper found that increased exposure to family violence and high PTSD symptoms in mothers were correlated. A child's behaviors reflect their experienced interactions with others and their environment (Bandura, 2007). Similarly, a study was conducted by Haj-Yahia et al. (2021), that looks at exposure to family violence in childhood and posttraumatic stress symptoms. Haj-Yahia et al. found a significant relationship between witnessing parental violence and the child developing posttraumatic stress symptoms. Haj-Yahia et al. used Bandura's theory because this framework holds that negative experiences in childhood can have an adverse effect over time. Bandura's

theory will be used in this study to show the possible adverse effects on a law enforcement officer's family. Possible adverse effects may prove to vary depending on the perceived level of PTSD symptoms.

The social learning (Bandura, 2007) and its usage in previous research has mostly surrounded exposure of violence to children and how that exposure affects the children over time. Posttraumatic symptoms have only been researched thus far on the side of the children. There is little to no research using the social learning theory (Bandura, 2007) to view the possible effects of law enforcement officer perceived level of PTSD symptoms on family stress. The current study aims to fill the gap in the literature.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts**

#### **Information on Policing**

Police officers are expected to protect and serve their community, whether it be people, property, evidence, or the environment (Klimley, et al, 2018). Police officers are put in high-risk situations on the job, daily. Many researchers have mentioned policing as one of the most high-stressed jobs there is and has even been discussed in lines with chronic stress (Cho & Park, 2021; Klimley et al., 2018). Police officers often respond to critical incidents and even when the incident is not critical, they are still going from call to call. In a single shift, officers will go on countless calls. During the calls that officers are responding to, they may encounter physical altercations, emotionally distressing situations, crises, be required to utilize their taser or firearm, physically distressing situations, and more. Galanis et al. (2021) conducted a literature review on risk factors for stress among police officers and found specified stressful situations to be robberies,

murders, violence, on-duty injuries, crowd control, traffic collisions, suicides, sexual abuse, and interacting with rape victims. Stressful situations can arise in the smallest of towns and largest of cities. Larger cities have been tied to a more significant amount of stress due to sheer volume (Galanis et al, 2021). The countless situations that officers can find themselves in can be significantly stressful. A large part of what policing entails has to do with the organizational requirements such as shift work, overtime writing reports, and dealing with administration.

Police officers do shift work that rotates, so the officers will never have the same shift indefinitely. Night shift specifically has shown to have detrimental effects in many studies, which is a shift that must be covered by officers. Mumford et al. (2021) found many negative effects in relation to sleep work. Police officers that were single (slept alone) and did not hold a minimum of an associates degree were found to have significantly less sleep when working night shifts (Mumford et al, 2021) (Nevels et al, 2021). Night shift officers may get sleep, though other factors must be included such as sleep quality and sleep disturbances. Mumford et al. found that officers who worked night shift were more likely to have poor sleep quality and increased sleep disturbances. Shift work continued to show some alarming results on health, including an increase chance at 177% of having diabetes and 40% more likely to have high cholesterol (Mumford et al, 2021). Shift work is a common part of policing, though there are few officers who do not experience shift work which allowed Mumford et al. to find the vast differences. Galanis et al. (2021) found that officers working in larger cities were at



increased risk of overtime work, leading to a higher likelihood of stress, family conflict, burnout, lack of sleep, and little time to self-outside of work.

Overtime work can increase depending on people being out sick, injured, on vacation, or simply understaffed. Other situations may arise that require additional staffing needs such as crisis calls, increased internet crime, and assisting fellow agencies. Jackman et al. (2021) found a significant stressor to be workload which has increased over time due to being understaffed, internet crime, and helping surrounding agencies. Due to the amount of work that piles up, officers often go into work on their 'off days' to try and catch up on their own work or to assist other agencies with pressing matters (Jackman et al, 2021). Many studies have noted burnout to be of significant concern along with Jackman et al.. An officer in Jackman et al.'s study stated that officers are tired and broke, that morale is "horrendous." Further, officers were found to hold fear for their safety due to being understaffed and feelings of disheartenment (Jackman et al, 2021). Redelinghuys et al. (2019) found that organizational stress can significantly affect an officer's psychological well-being, relationships in the workplace, sense of purpose, and personal growth. Organizational stressors can be treacherous for many, leading to fatigue, stress, and burnout.

Law enforcement has a hierarchy that is strictly followed that may rank from a new patrol officer or deputy to the Chief or Sheriff. Each rank within law enforcement comes with its positives and negatives. The lower ranked you are, the more time you are likely to spend on patrol, which means experiencing traumatic and stressful situations (Galanis et al, 2021). The higher ranking the individual is, the more likely that individual

is to have more time in the office. More time in the office typically means the individual is likely to make a higher number of important decisions with pressure behind them. The more decisions an individual must make, the higher chance of having increased stress (Galanis et al, 2021).

There is a plethora of stressors within law enforcement that officers deal with daily. Regardless of what an officer deals with within their day, they are still required to uphold a positive image with the community and maintain a positive relationship with community members (Vaitkeviciute & Dobrizinskiene, 2022). Vaitkeviciute and Dobrizinskiene (2022) noted that in today's society it is important to establish close and positive relationships with the community. The image of a department and its officers must be constantly maintained (Vaitkeviciute & Dobrizinskiene, 2022). When a department holds a good image, they are more likely to receive candidates for their department and have officers with higher confidence and job satisfaction (Valickas et al, 2015; Vaitkeviciute & Dobrizinskiene, 2022). If the department maintains a positive image, the employees will reap those benefits.

The media and social media have a dramatic impact on the relationship that law enforcement has with communities. Valickas et al. (2015) discussed the importance of image due to the impact it has on social media coverage. Many departments are scrutinized or trusted based on other department personnel that the public has come into contact with or has seen on social media (Valickas et al, 2015). Departments that have negative images can negatively affect departments everywhere (Valickas et al, 2015).

## **Coping Skills**

Algorani and Gupta (2022) define coping mechanisms as mobilized thoughts and behaviors used to deal with stressful situations internally or externally. Coping mechanisms consist of conscious and purposeful engagements. The way an individual chooses to manage their stress is what is called 'coping styles' (Algorani & Gupta, 2022). There are reactive skills that take place in response to the stressor and proactive coping, that is used to mitigate future stressors (Algorani & Gupta, 2022). Gutschmidt and Vera (2022) found that officers were seeking and giving advice to fellow officers, formulating plans for their presented problem, discussing the problem, seeking mental health services, exercise and venting to fellow officers.

Edwards et al. (2021) did a study on police stress and coping and found the most frequently used coping skills to be acceptance, distraction, planning, humor, venting, and positive reframing. Edwards et al. found that the proactive coping skills that officers used the most were physical activities, engaging in hobbies, mental distractions, and spending time with family and friends.

## **Maladaptive Coping Skills**

Maladaptive coping skills are coping mechanisms that have negative outcomes and increase the significance of psychopathological symptoms (Algorani & Gupta, 2022). Some more common maladaptive coping skills are avoidance, disengagement from others or activities, and suppression of emotions (Algorani & Gupta, 2022). Common maladaptive coping strategies found by Gutschmidt and Vera (2022) were alcohol use, accusing fellow officers of emotionally suppressing by avoiding the source of stress.

Edwards and colleagues (2021) noted several maladaptive coping skills that share similarity with those of Algorani and Grupta (2022), and Gutschmidt and Vera (2022). Substance use, self-blame, denial, disengagement, and morbid humor were noted by Edwards et al. (2021) as maladaptive coping skills. Humor is a coping skill that can be positive or maladaptive depending on how it is used. Many researchers list humor as a positive coping skill, though Edwards et al. listed humor in both positive coping skills and maladaptive coping skills. Another slightly different view is that of Anders et al. (2022) who found in their study of law enforcement about risk and protective factors for PTSD, that distraction can be a maladaptive coping skill that leads to increased chances of PTSD and anxiety.

A study on prediction of alcohol and tabaco consumption in police officers by Copenhaver & Tewksbury (2018) found that extensive research on alcohol and tabaco use in law enforcement. Over the years researchers have found that law enforcement officers that use alcohol or tobacco for coping, use the substances at a disproportionately high rate (Copenhaver & Tewksbury, 2018). Copenhaver and Tewksbury (2018) found significant predictors of alcohol use to be higher education, working an extra shift, working multiple extra shifts, and use of energy drinks. Working a second shift increased the number of days the officer would drink while off-duty by a staggering 68.5%, while working multiple extra shifts increased the days by 71.5% rate (Copenhaver & Tewksbury, 2018). On average, it was found that officers drank 1.81 energy drinks per day while on duty (Copenhaver & Tewksbury, 2018). Energy drinks can be used for additional adrenaline to keep the officer's energy up. Copenhaver and Tewksbury (2018)

noted that energy drinks may increase the days of drinking while off-duty because their body wants stabilization of arousal.

Exercise is a positive coping mechanism that if done for one additional day every week, decreases the chances of tobacco use by 20 percent (Copenhaver & Tewksbury, 2018). Officers struggling with alcohol use should seek professional help rather than face disciplinary consequences for seeking professional help (Copenhaver & Tewksbury, 2018).

### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

A study done in 2020 by McDevitt found that police officers were five times more likely than civilians to experience depression and PTSD and were at a significantly higher risk of suicidal ideation and suicide. PTSD, depression, and suicide are rampant in law enforcement officers, it is no surprise that one in four officers will have suicidal ideation in their lifetime (McDevitt, 2020).

There are several diagnostic criteria that an individual must meet to be diagnosed with PTSD. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (DSM-5, APA 2013) includes eight criteria and two specifications. People who are exposed to a traumatic event or an accumulation of traumatic events. Common symptoms of PTSD may include flashbacks, nightmares, day intrusions, difficulties sleeping, hypervigilance, and short-term memory issues, (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Many individuals struggling with PTSD may also place an irrational amount of blame on themselves, further increasing the likelihood of isolation, avoidance of triggering external and internal stimuli linked to memories of traumatic events, and

experience negative thoughts and emotions. Other PTSD symptoms include irritability, risky behavior, difficulties concentrating, aggression, and destructive behavior (American Psychological Association, 2013). Some severe symptoms include dissociation, depersonalization, and derealization (American Psychological Association, 2013). Post-traumatic stress disorder can be a very complex diagnosis making it difficult to diagnose and understand the complexity of it.

### **Causes for PTSD/PTSD Symptoms in Law Enforcement**

Law enforcement officers are at a higher risk than the civilian population for developing PTSD, varying from 5% to 32% versus the civilian population at 4% (Klimely et al, 2018). Law enforcement officers experience a significant number of traumatic events in comparison to civilians. Studies have revealed the severity of the critical incidents that officers respond to can greatly increase the risks of developing PTSD (Klimely et al, 2018). The incidents that are strongly related to PTSD are line of duty deaths (having their life taken on the job by a civilian or incident), and physical assault (Klimely et al, 2018). Other factors that may contribute to the development of PTSD include officer's degree of exposure to the event(s), proximity, the officer's role in the event(s), any personal losses to the officer, and maladaptive coping skills (Klimely et al, 2018) (Anders et al, 2022).

A significant number of officers experience many events that contribute to the development of PTSD. A number of different stressors can contribute to the development of PTSD, such as routine work, shift work, court appearances, paperwork, and lack of proper equipment or proper functioning equipment (Klimely et al, 2018). Klimely (2018)

and colleagues found that increased stress led to deficits in memory after 10-days, meaning that routine work that increases stress, increases the individual's vulnerability to PTSD.

Perceived organizational issues can lead to significant stress, increasing the likelihood of PTSD in officers. Burnout, which is a result of consistent high stress, is influenced mostly by organizational stress (Anders et al, 2022). In addition to organizational issues, negative working conditions and operational stress are significant contributors to negative mental and physical health (Galanis et al, 2021).

### **PTSD in Law Enforcement Officers**

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a highly complex disorder. There are many factors that contribute to PTSD in law enforcement officers. These factors include organizational stress, and traumatic situations. In general civilians experience significantly fewer complex trauma (Violanti et al, 2018) (Chopko et al, 2018). On average, 30% of officers meet full criteria for a PTSD diagnosis or experience a significant number of symptoms related to PTSD (Chopko et al, 2018). Law enforcement work often includes several possible stressors and trauma that may lead to PTSD (Violanti et al, 2018). In a study conducted by Violanti and colleagues (2018) on the associations between work stressors in law enforcement and PTSD, it was found that officers that reported higher work stress also reported higher occurrences of PTSD symptoms. Work stress may include organizational and operational stress. Organizational stress was more likely to lead to PTSD (Violanti et al, 2018). Oginska-Bulik & Juczynski (2021) conducted a study that found burnout, rumination, and PTSD to all be closely

linked. The symptoms of PTSD and burnout that Oginska-Bulik & Juczynski (2021) found that symptoms of burnout and PTSD included symptoms such as apathy, cynicism, disengagement, exhaustion, fatigue, generalized irritability, rumination, intrusive rumination, and sleep disorders. It is likely with these symptoms that they are unlikely to seek mental health services. Shalev and colleagues (2017) found that law enforcement officers who have PTSD may experience issues with substance abuse, dissociation, thought intrusions, hyperarousal, hypervigilance, depression, suicidality, sleep disturbances, sex disturbance, avoidance, paranoia, altered mood, and irritability.

### **Effects of PTSD/PTSD Symptoms in Law Enforcement Officers**

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can significantly affect an officer's ability to do their job. Rumination is often a prevalent symptom in PTSD (Oginska-Bulik & Juczynski, 2021). Rumination can interfere with the officer's cognitive ability to stay focused and make decisions (Oginska-Bulik & Juczynski, 2021). Officers are often in situations where they must make decisions in a split second that could affect lives and the wellbeing of others; being cognitively sharp as an officer is a must. Shalev and colleagues (2017) also mentioned altered mood and cognition as a potentially troublesome symptoms of PTSD Shalev and colleagues (2017) found that law enforcement with PTSD also may experience intense avoidance reactions, paranoia, hypervigilance, and consistent waking when trying to sleep. As noted by Klimely and colleagues (2018), avoidance behaviors can lead to avoidance of important paperwork not being completed; this may cause the officer significant problems in the workplace. Officers write numerous reports every shift that are necessary for cases to be filed.



Incomplete paperwork in law enforcement can negatively affect those involved in the case and the community. Lack of sleep may also negatively impact an officer's cognitive ability (Mumford et al, 2021).

Violanti and colleagues (2018) found that active coping skills can decrease the chances of PTSD symptoms. Likewise, passive coping skills such as avoidance and denial can increase symptoms of PTSD. Unfortunately, the stigma in law enforcement about mental health makes it difficult for law enforcement officers to seek help when needed. Officers will often use coping skills they have or formed throughout their career regardless of how negative those coping skills may be. Oginska-Bulik & Juczynski (2021) found that those struggling in treatment may also struggle with absenteeism; they are more likely to leave their department. Often these behaviors are due to burnout or stress and are likely to exacerbate symptoms of PTSD.

### **Law Enforcement Officer's Family Stress**

#### **Law Enforcement Family Culture**

Law enforcement officer's families are highly impacted by the job that they do. Vicarious effects of stress are an often-overlooked issue within officer wellness (Bisbee, 2023). Many families, including the officer, will feel the strain of shift work when holidays, special events, and birthdays are missed (McDevitt, 2020). Family support has been shown to be a significant positive factor for the officer's resiliency and mental health. Officers missing out on many holidays and family events, may start to feel distant and even isolate when they do have the opportunity to spend time with family (Richards et al, 2021). If the officer's family is supportive of them and supportive of mental health,

the officer is more likely to reach out if needed (Richards et al, 2021). Due to the impact of shift work on the family, the officer may need to place high priority on family time to ensure that the important relationships in their lives stay strong and healthy.

Amendola and colleagues did a study in 2020 with 14 LEO wives, revealing the struggles that spouses and families face. Wives that were interviewed agreed that the officers' love for their jobs took precedence over their commitment to the family (Amendola, 2020). Shift work also causes law enforcement significant stress. Shift work may include additional stressors such as overtime, flex time, and special task unit hours. Additionally, as work stress increases, the officer is more likely to retreat from the family, increasing the family's stress and in turn increasing the officer's stress (Amendola, 2020).

Law enforcement families work better if they can work together as a team. However, sometimes officers can struggle with letting go of the decision-making process and letting the family collaborate in making decisions. Amendola and colleague's (2020) study found that 78.57 of their participants felt that the officer's need to control situations and problems at home negatively impacted the family.

An officer's family is significantly impacted by the officer's work and vice versa, making it important to breakdown the possible impact of the job on the family system. Shift work and overtime can be detrimental to the officer's mental and physical health, and in turn it can negatively impact the officer's family (citation). The study conducted by Amendola, and colleagues (2020) revealed that spouses reported high stress due to the bulk of childcare and parental duties falling solely on them. Home life continues when

the officer is at work, and if the officer has kids, that means that there is someone taking care of that home life and many times alone.

Spouses reported the officers' behaviors or comments were the most stressful behaviors to live with (Amendola, 2020). Spouses found other behaviors more worrisome including the officer isolating, being irritable, working out too much, not talking, shutting down, drinking, morbid humor, and infidelity (Amendola, 2020). It is important to note that many of these stressors brought forth by spouses are negative coping mechanisms that officers use to deal with stress. Often loved ones realize that officers need help before officers realize it themselves (Richards et al, 2021). The negative coping skills that officer exhibit also were reported to have a negative effect on their intimate life, with the spouses reporting this as an additional stressor (Amendola, 2020). The officers' irritability followed by other negative coping skills affect their spouses, and children. It also tends to "take the romance" out of the marriage (Amendola, 2020). Lack of connection and support from officers' families can cause a negative ripple effect and a difficult loop for both families and the officers to get out of.

Spouses reported other stressors which included waiting for a call that something terrible had happened to their law enforcement spouses and hearing the law enforcement officers tell the spouses that "they are worth more to them dead, than alive" (Amendola, 2020). Spouses fear regarding the safety of their law enforcement significant other is often high and comes with negative effects (Bisbee, 2023). Uncomfortable but common statements could be part of the dark humor that many spouses reported as stressful. The family may take the uncomfortable statement seriously since some of the alarming

statements the law enforcement officer makes could hold some truth. If law enforcement individuals make harsh or alarming statements, it tends to stress out the families. Spouses also reported a lack of friendships outside of the departments, making them feel as if all they are is “cop wives” (Amendola, 2020). Spouses feeling like they are nothing but a “cop’s wife,” are essentially losing their sense of self, which is likely to further cause issues within the marriage and family unit. Finally, 64.29% of the participants in Amendola and colleagues (2020) agreed that their officer’s unwillingness to seek out help with their negative coping styles, and constant need to be in control made their relationships particularly difficult.

Kreneva and colleagues (2020) noted the importance of a clear understanding of emotional stability and values between the LEO and the LEO’s family. Engaging with the LEO while showing empathy is additionally a way to create a mutual understanding and increase satisfaction within the marriage (Kreneva et al, 2020). Increased satisfaction in a marriage can decrease guilt, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness (Kreneva et al, 2020). Having a clear understanding between and positive communication between the LEO and spouse helps to create a better family environment.

The ability to accept responsibility within a marriage and family has been found to be a significant positive in law enforcement families (Kreneva et al, 2020). Acceptance of responsibility has been directly linked to marriage satisfaction, emotional connection, understanding between partners, and the ability to listen and hear one another (Kreneva et al, 2020). The mentioned key aspects to a good relationship between a LEO and their spouse all lead to a much more successful and healthy family environment.

Law enforcement officer's kids have two common issues as noted by Miller (2007), time the kids get to spend with their parent(s) and the difficulties that come along with being a cop's kid. Some discussed issues that cop's kids experience is peer rejection because of disapproval of law enforcement and attitudes towards authoritative figures (Miller, 2007). Kids can often struggle with their feelings of loyalty to their parent's career and peer pressures. Time is a huge concern for cop's kids. LEO's often work long hours and many overtime shifts as discussed, this is one of the many disconnecting points (Miller, 2007).

Time with parents, loyalty, and peer pressure are just the surface issues of being a cop's kid. Brisbee (2023) found that children may suffer from the negative effects of a law enforcement officer parent. Law enforcement children can show periods of heightened anxiety and worry following knowledge of a critical incident (Brisbee, 2023). Miller (2007) noted that LEO's may not feel that they have time to do common chores around the house or help with the kids. As mentioned by Kreneva and colleagues (2020), accepting responsibility around the house can be significant for the health of the family system.

### **Mental Health Stigma**

Most of the police force is male, and it is seen as a traditionally masculine profession (McDevitt, 2020). This masculine culture tends to view mental health services as being needed by people who are weak (McDevitt, 2020). Marshall and colleagues (2021) found that male-dominated fields have a stigma that is seemingly publicly connected to mental health. Law enforcement officers have the stigma on mental health

that holds expectations of mental toughness, with little expression of emotions (Marshall et al, 2021). Law enforcement officers are expected to have a controlled demeanor that is dependable (Marshall et al, 2021). The mental health stigma in law enforcement is not only a fear of weakness but is also influenced by both organizational and environmental factors. The mental health stigma surrounding law enforcement has created significant barriers between those that need mental health services and the actual services.

Beyond the stigma placed by public and the organization, if an officer can break the barrier of the stigma of mental health treatment, they are still unlikely to seek help and be honest about their symptoms (Marshall et al, 2021). Marshall and colleagues (2021) found that there is limited information about officer's symptoms of PTSD in the literature. In part this may be due to law enforcement officers being fearful of the mental health treatment being used against them. The problem with mental health disorders in law enforcement going unchecked is that mental health problems can wreak havoc in the professional and home life of the officers. Officers who experience continued mental health issues without positive coping strategies, may be more likely to experience burnout, psychological distress, depression, increased alcohol use, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbances, sleep disorders, and other mental health related problems (Boland & Salami, 2021). Mental health issues can cause significant ramifications in the workplace. Fear and her colleagues (2012) found that the stigma of mental health treatment was also felt by the leadership in law enforcement organizations. Commonly officers feel that leadership is not in support of the officers seeking mental health

services, or that leadership has discouraged officers from seeking mental health services (Fear et al, 2012).

Jetelina and colleagues (2020) conducted a study on the prevalence of mental health and mental health care among police officers. They found that some officers felt they could not seek mental health services because it may result in a fitness for duty evaluation. A fitness for duty evaluation is used by departments to ensure that officers are emotionally and physically able to do their jobs, perform essential functions of the job, and to ensure that officers do not pose a threat to themselves or others (Corey & Zelig, 2020).

“Stigma must be eliminated so that police officers feel safe in seeking assistance for mental health issues” (McDevitt & McDevitt, 2020, p. 4). Stigmas about mental health issues are not organizational. Tsai and colleagues (2018) conducted a study on the interplay of work environment, counseling support, and family discussions with co-workers among police officers. They found that the level of education adds to the mental health stigma. Officers that were more educated were found to be more negative about receiving the support of a counselor (Tsai et al, 2018).

### **Summary**

This chapter covered police culture, police organizational and operational stress that can cause symptoms of PTSD. Symptoms of PTSD, stressors that law enforcement officer’s families endure due to the symptoms of PTSD, and the overall cost endured by officer’s and their families were also covered.

There is a clear pattern of stressors that officers and officer's families have endured throughout the years, though little research has been done on the effects of PTSD on families. Research on law enforcement and the effect on their families is sparse at best. This study is needed to close the research gap, and to afford officers and law enforcement agencies an opportunity to understand the inner workings and effects of mental health on the officer and the family.



## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there is a relationship between endorsement of symptoms of PTSD and perceived level of family issues in law enforcement officers, utilizing the Power Portfolio survey. The independent variable was the level of perceived symptoms of PTSD as measured by the Power Portfolio. The dependent variables were the level of perceived family issues that the law enforcement officer is experiencing as measured by the Power Portfolio.

Archival data was utilized to assess whether there is relationship between a law enforcement officer's endorsed symptom of PTSD and family issues. The data for this study was archival. The data was initially collected as part of a larger study conducted by a nonprofit in California with the assistance of the National Police Suicide Foundation. The President of the non-profit organization gave permission to use the archival data in this study. The data was provided in a password protected excel file with no identifying information.

### **Methodology**

This study utilized a quantitative research design to determine whether there is a relationship between law enforcement officers' endorsement of symptoms of PTSD and perceived family issues as measured by the Power Portfolio. The data were archival in nature. One hundred and nineteen participants' data were analyzed for this study as determined by using the G\*Power software developed by Faul et al. (2009) and recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018) to identify an appropriate sample size.

Participants in the original study included local, state, and federal law enforcement officers. The participants in the original study were attending a class on officer suicide through the National Police Suicide Foundation. The data was provided by the non-profit in a password protected EXCEL spreadsheet.

### **Research questions**

Research Question 1: Does the level of perceived family issues have a predictive linear relationship with endorsement of PTSD symptoms as measured by the Power Portfolio?

$H_01$ : There is not a predictive linear relationship between the increased level of perceived family issues with an increased endorsement of PTSD symptoms as measured by the Power Portfolio.

$H_a1$ : There is a predictive linear relationship between the increased level of perceived family issues with an increased endorsement of PTSD symptoms as measured by the Power Portfolio.

Research Question 2: Does the level of endorsed PTSD symptoms affect the officer's likelihood to avoid family?

$H_02$ : There is no relationship between the level of endorsed PTSD symptoms effect and the officer's likelihood to avoid family.

$H_a2$ : There is a relationship between the level of endorsed PTSD symptoms effect and the officer's likelihood to avoid family.

Research Question 3: Does the level of perceived PTSD symptoms increase the officer's family's stress

surrounding their job?

*H<sub>03</sub>*: There is no relationship between the increased level of perceived PTSD symptoms and the officer's family's stress surrounding their job.

*H<sub>3</sub>*: There is a relationship between the increased level of perceived PTSD symptoms and the officer's family's stress surrounding their job.

### **Population**

The targeted population for this study was police professionals that attended the National Police Suicide Foundation training on police suicide. The participants at the training consisted of law enforcement officers, 18 years of age or older, from numerous departments across the United States.

### **Sample or Participants**

One hundred officers that participated in the larger study were chosen randomly and their data was stripped of any identifying information and provided in a password protected EXCEL file. The participants consisted of law enforcement officers from numerous agencies, including municipal, local, state, and federal law agencies all located in the United States. All participants included in the study participated voluntarily and were over the age of 18. All the participant's identifying information has been protected and kept confidential. The participants were randomly selected from archival data. To secure ethical and confidentiality concerns, the data set was accessible to the researcher and dissertation committee. Following the study, all the data used will be destroyed in compliance with APA guidelines after 5 years.

**Instrumentation**

The participants were given The Personal Observation Wellness and Evaluation Report: Power Portfolio (PP), designed by a licensed psychologist that specializes in treating first responders. The PP is a 109-item, self-report questionnaire designed to identify risks and protective factors among law enforcement officers. The PP was used to measure the levels of risks and concerns in numerous domains that are directly related to law enforcement individuals. The established overall scores of the PP are based on the total amount of the risk factor raw scores. The domains included in the PP are work-related problems, family problems, dissociation, mania, aggression, depression, anxiety, alcohol and substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts. For the purpose of this study, only questions related to PTSD symptomology and family problems will be used. The independent variable will be the level of perceived symptoms of PTSD as measured by the PP. The dependent variables are the level of perceived family issues that the law enforcement officer is experiencing as measured by the PP.

**Data sources**

All data used in this study was archival. The data was provided by a nonprofit agency in California. The data was collected as part of a large research study focusing on law enforcement stress and coping strategies. The study included 119 participants. The participants included local, state, and federal law enforcement officers. The data was provided by the California non-profit agency in a password protected EXCEL spreadsheet. For the confidentiality and safety of the participants, all identifying information was removed prior to being provided for this study.

**Data Analysis Plan**

This study utilized three separate regression analyses to determine the relationship between the perceived family issues and the predicting variable, perceived PTSD symptoms. The independent variable was the level of perceived symptoms of PTSD as measured by the PP. The dependent variables were the level of perceived family issues that the law enforcement officer is experiencing as measured by the PP. Walden University provided the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software that was utilized to perform the statistical analysis for this study. Utilizing SPSS helped to determine whether there was a relationship between endorsement of PTSD symptoms and perceived level of family issues in law enforcement officers.

**Summary**

Chapter 3 outlined the research design, methodology, population, sample, data collection process, data analysis, and ethical considerations for the current study. This study was quantitative, nonexperimental, and used archival data collected by the National Police Suicide Foundation and Director of a nonprofit organization. In this study, I aimed to determine if there was a relationship between the endorsement of PTSD symptoms and perceived level of family issues, avoidance, and stress in law enforcement officers. Results of the study are discussed in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

Chapter 4 provides results for the presented study, where the relationship between endorsement of symptoms of PTSD was examined for any predicted relationship with perceived family issues, avoidance of family, and family stress as measured by the POWER Portfolio. The independent variable for the present study was PTSD, as measured by the Dissociation/PTSD scale within the POWER Portfolio. The dependent variables for the present study were perceived family issues, stress, and avoidance as measured by scales located in the POWER Portfolio. The purpose of this study was to address the gap in the literature concerning perceived family stress, issues, and law enforcement avoidance of family. The following are the research questions and hypothesis for this study:

Research Question 1: Does the level of perceived family issues have a predictive linear relationship with endorsement of PTSD symptoms as measured by the Power Portfolio?

$H_01$ : There is not a predictive linear relationship between the increased level of perceived family issues with an increased endorsement of PTSD symptoms as measured by the Power Portfolio.

$H_a1$ : There is a predictive linear relationship between the increased level of perceived family issues with an increased endorsement of PTSD symptoms as measured by the Power Portfolio.

Research Question 2: Does the level of endorsed PTSD symptoms affect the officer's likelihood to avoid family?

$H_02$ : There is no relationship between the level of endorsed PTSD symptoms effect and the officer's likelihood to avoid family.

$H_a2$ : There is a relationship between the level of endorsed PTSD symptoms effect and the officer's likelihood to avoid family.

Research Question 3: Does the level of perceived PTSD symptoms increase the officer's family's stress surrounding their job?

$H_03$ : There is no relationship between the increased level of perceived PTSD symptoms and the officer's family's stress surrounding their job.

$H_a3$ : There is a relationship between the increased level of perceived PTSD symptoms and the officer's family's stress surrounding their job.

### **Data Collection**

Archival data was used in this study, with permission obtained from the nonprofit organization that collected the data. The nonprofit organization's representatives and I completed and signed a formal data release agreement. The data was originally collected by a licensed psychologist who specialized in the treatment of law enforcement officers and other first responders. The data was collected during a larger study at a training put on by the National Police Suicide Foundation. The archival data was provided to me in a password protected Excel sheet. The POWER Portfolio was utilized to measure the constructs: PTSD, stress, and avoidance.

The POWER Portfolio consists of a 109-item self-report questionnaire specifically designed to assess law enforcement for risk and protective factors. Risk and protective factors assessed included ADHS, anger, anxiety, concentration, depression, dissociation/PTSD, fatigue, panic attacks, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, and work-related problems. Administration time of the POWER Portfolio was 15 to 20 minutes.

The dissociation/PTSD subscale examined in this study contained 13 items that identify exposure to concentration issues, fear of death or dying, flashbacks, hypervigilance, irritability, isolation, nightmares, and traumatic events. The Family subscale contains 17 items that measure avoidance of family, familial issues, isolation, substance use, harsh behaviors towards the family such as yelling and arguing, issues with the officer's significant other, and troubles at home. The Family Stress subscale contains three items that measure the officer's relationship with their family being good, arguments that take place with the officer and their family, and issues that arise at home because of the officer's behaviors. The Avoidance subscale contains three items that measure the officer's feeling of joy in time spent with family, the officer looking forward to going home after work, and the officer not wanting to avoid family.

The archival data used in this study totaled at 664 participants, though a subsample of 119 randomly selected participants was used for the present study, as determined by the G\*Power calculation to obtain the medium effect size ( $f^2 = 0.15$ ) with and alpha level of .05 and a power level of .95. The data provided to me was inputted into the SPSS software provided by Walden University. The statistics used in this study included cases with no missing values or variables.



## Demographics

The original survey included a demographics survey within the questionnaire that included the participant's age, number of years in law enforcement, the officer's rank, whether the officer had received any stress management training, and if the officer had received any mental health treatment by a professional. All participants were greater than 18 years of age, and of law enforcement agencies locally, state, or federally who were participating in the police suicide training. Although the demographics were included in the original questionnaire, the demographics were not provided to me, therefore will have no inclusion or mention in the current study.

## Results

A simple linear regression was used as the statistical procedure for all three questions in this study. A simple linear regression can indicate if a predictive model can be generated. The dependent variables used for this study were family ( $M = 33.0756$ ,  $SD = 13.54663$ ), family stress ( $M = 10.8403$ ,  $SD = 2.47353$ ), and avoidance ( $M = 5.612$ ,  $SD = 3.35471$ ). The independent variable for this study was dissociation/PTSD ( $M = 31.2185$ ,  $SD = 13.82650$ ). Three separate simple linear regression procedures were run using SPSS for this study. The archival data used for this study met the assumptions for a linear analysis. The linear analysis included independence, normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity.

### Linear Regression Results for RQ1

A simple linear regression was performed to see if a predictive model could be generated between Dissociation/PTSD and the officer's overall score of Family. A

significant relationship between the two variables was found,  $F(1, 117) = 124.207$ ,  $R^2 = .511$ . Dissociation/PTSD perceived symptoms were found to predict the officer's overall score of Family ( $\beta = .718$ ,  $t(118) = 11.145$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The results of the simple linear regression show that the null hypothesis can be rejected. A relationship does exist between law enforcement officer's overall scale of Dissociation/PTSD and the overall score of family, as measured by the POWER portfolio scales. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) was calculated at .511 which suggests that 51.1% of the variance in the variable family can be explained by Dissociation/PTSD, this would be considered a moderate effect size.

### **Linear Regression Results for RQ2**

A simple linear regression was performed to see if a predictive model could be generated between Dissociation/PTSD and Avoidance. A significant relationship between the two variables was found,  $F(1, 117) = 22.886$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $R^2 = .164$ . Dissociation/PTSD perceived symptoms were found to predict the officer's overall score of Avoidance ( $\beta = .404$ ,  $t(118) = 4.784$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

The result of the simple linear regression shows that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) was calculated at .156 which suggests that 15.6% of the variance in the variable of avoidance can be explained by Dissociation/PTSD, this would be considered a mild effect size.

### **Linear Regression Results for RQ3**

A simple linear regression was performed to see if a predictive model could be generated between Dissociation/PTSD and the officer's overall score of Stress. A

significant relationship between the two variables was not found,  $F(1, 117) = 2.539, p = .001, R^2 = .013$ . Dissociation/PTSD perceived symptoms were not found to predict officer's overall score of Stress ( $\beta = .146, t(118) = 1.593, p > .05$ ).

The results of the simple linear regression show that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. The p value was not significant and was rejected. The relationship between law enforcement officer's overall scale of Dissociation/PTSD and the overall score Stress is insignificant, as measured by the POWER portfolio scales.

### **Summary**

Three separate simple linear regressions were run to predict whether dissociation/PTSD related to family, stress, and avoidance in law enforcement officers and their families. The simple regression analysis revealed that the null hypothesis for RQ1 can be rejected. The result from the RQ1 simple regression analysis was found to be statistically significant, indication that there is a predictive relationship between dissociation/PTSD and family. The simple regression analysis revealed that the null hypothesis for RQ2 cannot be rejected. The effect size at .156 was too small to determine whether there is a relationship between law enforcement officer's overall scale of dissociation/PTSD and avoidance. The simple linear regression for RQ2 was found to be insignificant. The simple linear regression analysis revealed that the null hypothesis for RQ3 cannot be rejected. The effect size at .013 was too small to determine whether there is a relationship between law enforcement officer's dissociation/PTSD and Stress. The simple linear regression for RQ3 was found to be insignificant. In Chapter 5, I present an

interpretation of the current study's findings, the limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a relationship between endorsement of symptoms of PTSD and perceived level of family issues in law enforcement officers. Law enforcement officers endure a significant amount of stress in their jobs through constant exposure to crisis situations and organizational stressors (Silver et al, 2017; Staley et al, 2016). Unfortunately for LEO's, work-life and home-life are dominant domains in their lives that can negatively affect one another (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). Chopko et al. (2018) found that numerous studies have found that 30% of LEO's have reported clinically significant symptoms for PTSD. The symptoms experienced by LEO's due to PTSD have been noted to profoundly affect LEO's friends and family (Lennie, 2018; Miller, 2007). Current research on the effects of perceived PTSD symptoms on the LEO's family is quite scarce. The current study was conducted in hopes to further the available data and information on how perceived PTSD symptoms affect the LEO's family. This study can also help to contribute to the awareness and growth of mental health services for first responders and their families.

Research question one looked at the officer's dissociation/perceived level of PTSD symptoms and the overall score of family, family being the officer's ability to interact with the family and the family's response to the officer. Research question two looked at the officer's dissociation/perceived level of PTSD symptoms and the officer's overall score of avoidance, avoidance being avoidance of family. Research question three looked at the officer's scale of dissociation/PTSD and the officer's overall score of stress,

stress being work and home-life stressors. Three simple linear regressions were utilized to analyze the archival data. The first simple linear regression analyzed the relationship between the officer's Dissociation/PTSD and the officer's overall score of Family. The second simple linear regression analyzed the relationship between the officer's Dissociation/PTSD and the officer's overall score of Avoidance. The third simple linear regression analyzed the relationship between the officer's Dissociation/PTSD and the officer's overall score of Stress. Results from the first simple linear regression indicated a significant relationship between the law enforcement officer's overall scale of Dissociation/PTSD and the officer's overall score of Family. Dissociation/PTSD perceived symptoms were found to predict officer's overall score of Family. Results from the second simple linear regression indicated that there is a relationship between Dissociation/PTSD perceived symptoms and Avoidance. Dissociation/PTSD perceived symptoms were found to predict the officer's overall score of Avoidance. The effect size of the linear regression was unfortunately too small to determine a significant relationship between law enforcement officer's overall scale of Dissociation/PTSD and the overall score Avoidance. Results from the third linear regression indicated that a significant relationship between Dissociation/PTSD perceived symptoms and the officer's overall stress was not found. Unfortunately, the effect size of this linear regression was too small and did not reach significance.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The findings of this study illustrated statistically significant relationships between the officer's Dissociation/PTSD and the officer's overall score of Family and between the

officer's Dissociation/PTSD and the officer's overall score of Avoidance. The relationship between Dissociation/PTSD perceived symptoms and the officer's overall stress was statistically significant. The current study adds on to the finding of studies conducted by Miller (2007), Roberts and Levenson (2001), McDevitt, (2020), and Richards et al. (2021). This study found that perceived PTSD symptoms had a positive relationship with the officer's overall score of Family and the officer's overall score of Avoidance as measured by the scales in the POWER Portfolio. As the perceived symptoms of PTSD increase, the officer's overall familial issues increase. As the perceived symptoms of PTSD increase, the officer's overall Avoidance behaviors increase.

Law enforcement is a known masculine culture that tends to view the use mental health services to be weak (McDevitt, 2020). Marshall et al. (2021) found that LEO's are seemingly expected to have a controlled demeanor that is dependable. Law enforcement officers have a stigma surrounding mental health that creates expectations of mental toughness, and limited expression of emotions (Marshall et al, 2021). The mental health stigma for law enforcement has created significant barriers for LEO's seeking mental health services. The stigma surrounding mental health in law enforcement, unfortunately leaves officer's wary of seeking mental health services that could assist in the coping skills and processing required to decrease PTSD symptoms or build resiliency to the PTSD symptoms. The findings of the current study further express the importance of healthy coping skills, as the lack of healthy coping skills increase the perceived symptoms of PTSD.

The current study utilized Bandura's social learning theory (1977) as the theoretical framework. Social learning theory strives to explain the development of behavior, how it is maintained, and shaped (Wulfert, 2019). The officer's family, support, and family connectedness can have a significant positive or negative effect on the officer's behavior, maintained behavior, and ability to shape their behavior (McDevitt, 2020). Although an officer's family and support system can positively impact the officer, many officers choose not to express intimacy or put effort into their personal relationships (Chopko, 2018). Using Bandura's social learning theory, a better understanding of perceived PTSD symptoms and how those symptoms impact the overall family relationship.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations of this study include data collection, the nature of archival data, setting of data collection, participants comfort with the survey questions, and limitation of the participant pool. The data was collected during a training conducted by the National Police Suicide Foundation where participants completed a questionnaire in a large classroom setting. The participants were police officers from all over the United States interested in learning more about suicide prevention. It is likely that the officers that self-selected into this training had more interest in mental health issues than many of their colleagues. Therefore, these results may not accurately reflect all enforcement. The large classroom setting could have affected the participants' comfort, therefore possibly impacting clarity and honesty in their responses. The participants may have feared responding truthfully due to the nature of the setting; and being surrounded by peers.



### **Recommendations**

The current study utilized archival data that was collected during a police suicide training. Further research on the current study could focus on the replication of the study in a broader law enforcement population. In hopes of reaching generalized results, the study would need to be replicated throughout geographical areas and break down types of departments and positions. The current study found a significant relationship between officer's perceived PTSD symptoms/Dissociation and family overall, and officer's perceived PTSD symptoms/Dissociation and Avoidance. A significant relationship was not found between the officer's perceived PTSD symptoms/Dissociation and overall Stress. Future research should address this possible relationship in a different manner. Another important area for future research should include identifying the use of coping mechanisms, maladaptive coping mechanisms, and how the mental health field could help to improve mental health and resiliency in law enforcement.

### **Implications**

As addressed throughout chapters 1 and 2, LEO's face a higher-than-normal number of stressors on a daily basis that can affect their homelife. The stressors that LEO's endure in their work-life is a significant predictor of PTSD symptoms (Conn & Butterfield, 2013). The numerous symptoms an officer may endure due to work stress can further cause difficulties between the officer and the officer's family (Amendola, 2020). A fifth of LEO's have experienced symptoms of PTSD, causing a prominent issue for officers (Webber, 2019). Chopko and colleagues (2018) found that an officer's suffering from PTSD related symptoms engaged in more maladaptive coping skills in their

marriage, placing stress on the family. Further, Comer and colleagues (2014) specifically found the high number of effects that an officer's stress can have on their children.

Research thus far has begun to address the need for healthy coping skills and mental health resources to help with officers' PTSD related symptoms. The results of this study found that an officer's level of perceived PTSD symptoms has a positive correlation with family overall and avoidance behaviors. The findings of the current study bring awareness to specific areas of concern affecting the officer and the officer's family. From this study's findings, departments and mental health professionals can build awareness of symptomology, maladaptive coping skills, healthy coping skills, the effects of the work on LEO families, and possible future plans on how to help LEO's cope in a healthy way and to keep their home life healthy.

### **Positive Social Change**

Law enforcement officers who are struggling with perceived PTSD symptoms are more likely to utilize maladaptive coping skills, have difficulties at work, engage in avoidance behaviors with their family, lack healthy communication skills with their spouse, and have strained relationships with their children (Amendola, 2020; Brisbee, 2023; Chopko, 2018; McDevitt, 2020; Miller 2007). The level of perceived PTSD symptoms that an officer experiences is significantly related to many issues that can harm the officer's work-life and home-life. Stressors in either work-life or home-life can have a ripple effect on their lives, creating a viscous cycle for the officers, which further affects those around the officers. The findings from the current study and future studies may help with the understanding and development of mental health treatment options as well as

psychoeducation for law enforcement officers to help increase healthy coping skills and resiliency that will help in the officer's work-life and home-life. The current study can create positive social change by building awareness and aiding in the development of further resources and trainings that focus on the importance of healthy coping skills in law enforcement. Building the awareness of how stress can affect an officer and the officers' families can help to break the mental health stigma within the culture and create an area of positive growth and change for law enforcement and families of law enforcement.

### **Conclusion**

Law enforcement officers are expected to protect and serve their community through putting themselves in high-risk situations daily (Klimely, et al, 2018). Known as one of the most highly stressed jobs in society, policing comes with endless critical incidents such as physical altercations, life threatening calls, emotionally distressing situations, and more (Cho & Park, 2021). Officers work long, hard hours, and often work significant overtime hours or work on their days off (Jackman, et al, 2021). Algorani & Grupta (2022), and Gutschmidt & Vera (2022) found some of the highest used maladaptive coping skills to be substance use, self-blame, denial, disengagement, and morbid humor. Maladaptive coping skills can deepen the officer's stress and perceived level of PTSD symptoms, therefore further affecting the officer's home life. The current study contributed to the literature by identifying distinctive relationships between the officer's symptoms and areas of their lives. As measured by the scales within the

POWER Portfolio, this study found that a higher level of perceived PTSD symptoms increases the likelihood of avoidance behaviors and overall family stressors.

Due to the expectations that officers are placed under in order to care for themselves and the public, it is critical that the mental health of these individuals be an ongoing priority that is addressed. The findings of this study can raise awareness of the negative impact that an officer's stress can have on their family, creating a viscous cycle that affects their family and their work. This study can assist in the betterment of mental health treatment for officers and officer's families.

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