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Police Officer Perceptions of Parenting Experience Changes Following an On-Duty Child Death

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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2024

Abstract

Police Officers' Perceptions of Parenting Style Changes Following an On-Duty Child Death

by

Jennifer M. Sellers

MEd, Hardin-Simmons University, 2009

BSW, University of Texas at Arlington 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

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Abstract

Law enforcement officers (LEOs) work in careers that can be demanding, stressful, and traumatizing. Although researchers have explored vicarious, or secondary, trauma as it relates to a LEO bringing their experiences at work into the home environment, influencing their spouse or partner's mental and physical well-being, they have not yet investigated how a LEO's experience of a child death while on-duty might affect their parenting styles. The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the parenting styles that LEOs use or change when they have experienced a traumatic incident at work, specifically a child death. The study was a transcendental phenomenological inquiry that featured in-depth interviews with eight LEOs. The interview responses were coded and categorized to identify the following themes encompassing participants' perceptions and lived experience: vigilance and hypersensitivity to child safety, emotional intensity of the situation, cumulative effect of multiple experiences, adjustments in parenting style over time, career journey, early officer career experiences, and the emotional impact on officers. The study findings provide insight into how participants who had experienced an on-duty child death perceived its impact on their parenting style. Insight into this dynamic may be useful for positive social change to mental health clinicians, chaplains, peer support programmers, and leaders of police agencies in identifying and implementing targeted mental health treatment for officers and their families following extremely traumatic events.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to the law enforcement officers I have served alongside in the trenches and their families.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In most professions, stress is inherent in the job. Depending on the profession, stress can include deadlines, budgets, ensuring customer satisfaction, and/or dealing with the public. Law enforcement officers (LEO) encounter and face additional stressors that are unique to the policing profession when compared to other professions. The policing profession is a vital one within any society; officers are tasked with creating and managing the order and security of a population (Li et al., 2018). LEOs are trained to protect others first and themselves second, an ethos also shared by the military community. Military personnel and LEOs also share a strong sense of moral responsibility and a commitment to doing the right thing despite the circumstance (McCue et al., 2021). The military soldier and their family somewhat mirror the LEO and their family. Deployed military members can experience direct and vicarious war-related trauma (e.g., explosions, direct fire, and civilian and military adult and child deaths) that can affect their military family when they return home (Beauchaine, 2016; Ogle et al., 2018). LEOs can experience direct fire, adult and child deaths, and high-stress calls (e.g., an in-progress aggravated robbery) all during one shift. Historically, LEOs have struggled with mental health stigma and help-seeking following the experience of potentially traumatic events (Burns & Buchanan, 2020; Soomro & Yanos, 2019).

Trends in Help-Seeking

The strongest predictor for help-seeking in the military member is exposure to a deceased person (Morgan et al., 2017). In one study, military members were 7 times more likely to seek help from a military chaplain following the exposure to a dead body than

other types of on-duty exposures (Morgan et al., 2017). In their study of Ghanaian LEOs who were exposed to potentially traumatic events, Barnett et al. (2022) found that the number of exposures to potentially traumatic events did not predict trauma expression; however, the type of traumatic event did, particularly exposure to one or more dead bodies. Although critical incident inventories for the military and police do not specifically address a child death, Chopko (2017) highlighted how a police officer's exposure to a deceased person has been operationalized in the literature as a critical, violent incident that can emotionally overwhelm an officer. Variables influencing officers' mental health help-seeking behaviors include stigma, support from peers and upper command, confidentiality, and culturally competent therapists (Carlson-Johnson et al, 2020; Grant et al., 2021; Haecker, 2017; Jetelina et al., 2020).

The combination of organizational and occupational stressors in police work can place a burdened weight on the shoulders of LEOs that can feel insurmountable and unbearable in the work environment and at home (Varker et al., 2020). LEOs are more than their job: They are wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters, and sons. The responsibility of protecting and serving others can influence their home lives, and family stressors can affect their ability to serve and protect others. Researchers have studied the bidirectional nature of the stressors LEOs experience and have found work–family conflict and family–work conflict both to influence the lives of LEOs (Duxbury et al., 2021). Researchers have found significant impacts to parenting behaviors and the quality of family life attributable to a parent's work experiences (Moreira et al.,

2019). Other research has shown that the strategies used by parents to cope with work and family demands contribute to their child's health and well-being (Ohu et al., 2018).

The aim of this study was to understand LEO's perceptions of their parenting styles following an on-duty child death using work–family conflict as the theoretical underpinning. Understanding the impact, if any, of a child death while on duty and changes in an officer's parenting is needed to better safeguard the well-being of LEOs and their families. This study has many potential positive social change implications, including providing insight on how to foster resilience and decrease burnout among LEOs. It may also yield better understanding of work–family conflict following the experience of an on-duty child death. In conducting this study, I sought to identify factors that could reduce the adverse effects of experiencing an on-duty child death on LEOs and identify specific changes in parenting within their families. Chapter 1 addresses the study's background, problem statement, purpose, research questions (RQs), theoretical framework, nature, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance, concluding with a chapter summary.

Background

Due to the precarious dangers of police work, LEOs can experience occupational stress, which can influence the marital quality of officers and their spouses (Roberts et al., 2013; Tuttle et al., 2018). According to Ohu et al. (2019), that the existing research on the impact of work–family conflict on family health and well-being lacks perspective regarding specific critical incidents that LEOs face, like after working a child death, and the impact of those types of incidents on LEOs' families. Researchers have found the

impact of critical incidents, or potentially traumatic events like being exposed to a dead body, to increase the likelihood an officer will experience posttraumatic stress symptoms and other mental health symptoms (Carleton et al., 2019; Syed et al., 2020). The literature lacks specific insight into a police officer's direct experience of an on-duty child death and how the experience of a child death potentially changes or influences the parenting experience of the police officer.

Work Influences on Law Enforcement Officers' Family Life

Griffin and Sun (2018) examined work–family conflict and resilience as mediating factors of stress and burnout in LEOs. Pertinent to this study, the authors recommended that researchers assess police occupational hazards and work–family conflict, parenting, and resilience. Griffin and Sun (2018) further identified a gap in work–life research indicating the need for testing of other occupational groups, specifically the law enforcement population and their families as it relates to parenting, particularly after a traumatic incident like an on-duty child death. Tuttle et al. (2018) identified the impact of occupational stressors on mental health, extending to marital relationships, and recommended that additional research include how officers parent their children following a potentially traumatic event like an on-duty child death. The ongoing interplay of variables, such as mental health symptoms, continuing stress, and hours worked, may influence the officer while at work and create conflict in the home environment, including the marriage relationship and parent–child relationship (Moreira et al., 2019).

Problem Statement

LEOs work in careers that can be demanding, stressful, and traumatizing. The experiences of LEO can often influence their professional and personal identities and redefine them as they move throughout their career. In recent decades, LEOs have been culturally referred to as the "thin blue line" because, like military service members, many LEOs share an ethos of protection and self-sacrifice, like running into danger, saving others, and protecting them from harm despite the harm to themselves. They might also be expected to take on command roles like leading others in chaotic, dangerous situations. They respond to stressful incidents including child deaths, domestic violence, fatal traffic accidents, sexual assaults, school shootings, and numerous other types of negative issues. In one day, an LEO could respond to relatively benign calls like traffic violations and theft as well as much more potentially traumatic events.

Despite their involvement in positive interactions, LEOs have increased risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviors and higher rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Bishop, 2018). As an officer's exposure to potentially traumatic events increases, so does the likelihood of mental health symptoms (Carleton et al., 2019). In a study identifying critical incidents across public safety personnel and the incidence of mental health symptoms, sudden violent death and sudden accidental death were most the common potentially traumatic incidents encountered with sudden violent death the worst event (Carleton et al., 2019). Additionally, following exposure to these two incidents, the likelihood that officers screened positive for PTSD, generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety, and panic disorder increased as the number

of total exposures to different types of potentially traumatic events increased. In 2021, Blue Help, a Massachusetts group dedicated to compiling suicide statistics in law enforcement, reported that 186 officers committed suicide nationwide. In an article addressing the "code of silence" in law enforcement, Subramanian (2019) reported that more officers died by suicide than in the line of duty in 2018.

Considering these risk factors, stressors, and symptoms, other researchers have looked at factors influencing officers' mental health help-seeking behaviors and have found several influencing variables. Researchers have also looked at vicarious trauma, or secondary trauma, and how an LEO can bring their experiences at work to the home environment, influencing their spouse or partner's mental and physical well-being (Duxbury et al., 2021; Friese, 2020). Work and family are experienced by the family unit as a whole and are not mutually exclusive, and when potentially traumatic incidents occur at an increased rate over time in an officer's career, the cumulative effect and the ongoing experience of posttraumatic stress symptoms influences the family (Morr Loftus & Droser, 2020). According to my review of the literature, researchers have not further investigated the LEO family unit to examine how exposure to child deaths while on duty might affect officers' parenting styles.

LEOs can experience extreme occupational stressors compared to other occupations and may lack a traditional schedule that helps foster a work–life balance (Auerbach, 2018). The potentially traumatic incidents they could experience while on duty could also cumulatively affect their ability to self-regulate emotional states and cope with intense stress including how they regulate and cope with their spouses, partners, and

child or children (Salinas & Webb, 2018). Salinas and Webb (2018) found that occupational stress experienced by LEOs physically and mentally affected them, the organization they worked for, their family and friends, and the community. Work stressors can negatively influence one's ability to effectively participate in familial duties and can affect an individual's family dynamic (Xie et al., 2018). Xie et al. (2018) established that occupational stress and work–family conflict were mediated in their participants by differences in personalities and methods of emotional regulation, specifically coping. Griffin and Sun (2018) found that work–family conflict mediated police stress.

Children's perspectives of their parent's work are important in the LEO family dynamic as viewed from the work–family conflict theory (Morr Loftus & Droser, 2020). Morr Loftus and Droser (2020) noted that children experience parental work strain at a statistically significant higher rate than their parents. To date, according to my research, scholars have not explored how LEOs experience parenting changes following an on-duty child death as an integrant of work–life research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the parenting experiences of LEOs from their perspective following an on-duty child death. Using a transcendental phenomenological inquiry, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with eight LEOs to examine what they viewed as changes in parenting styles following an on-duty child death.

Research Questions

I developed the following three RQs to examine the impact of an on-duty child death as experienced by LEOs and their perception of their parenting style changes with their child or children under the age of 18:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of LEOs who have experienced a child death on duty?

RQ2: Did LEOs experience a perceived change in their parenting as a result of an on-duty child death response?

RQ3: For LEOs who had experienced an on-duty child death, what parenting strategies did they adapt from that exposure?

To answer the RQs, I posed 11 interview questions to participants. The questions were

1. Describe your reasons for becoming a police officer.
2. What would you like to voluntarily share about the members of your family?
3. Explain how the experience of the on-duty child death significantly impacted your relationship with your child or children in the days following the critical incident.
4. Describe your experience of an on-duty child death.
5. Describe your experience of multiple on-duty child deaths.
6. In what ways has your experience of parenting changed since becoming a police officer?
7. Describe how your parenting experiences changed 3 days following your experience of the on-duty child death.

8. Describe how the experience of the on-duty child death significantly impacted your parenting experiences with your child or children in the weeks following the child death.
9. Describe how the experience of the on-duty child death significantly impacted your parenting experiences with your child or children in the months following the child death.
10. Describe how the experience of the on-duty child death significantly impacted your parenting experiences with your child or children in the years following the child death.
11. Is there anything else you would like to add that we have not covered so far?

Theoretical Framework

I conducted a phenomenological inquiry within a social constructivist paradigm and the work–family conflict theoretical framework to explore the lived experiences of parenting of LEOs following an on-duty child death. Work–family conflict, which is also known as work interference with family, is a theoretical framework that can be used to define the negative impact between work and non-work domains due to incompatible demands, creating significant stress on the family dynamic (R. C. Johnson et al., 2019).

Nature of the Study

In conducting this phenomenological qualitative study, I sought to better understand the challenges and parenting experience changes that LEOs encounter following involvement in an on-duty child death. Use of this design allowed for a different perspective of challenges and difficulties LEOs face with their own child or

children following a critical incident. Audio-recorded, semistructured interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of eight LEOs who had a child or children ranging in age from 2 to 18 years old and who had experienced an on-duty child death. The participants were provided with informed consent and were interviewed at their police department, local church, community center, or another preferred meeting space, or via an online platform.

Definitions

Law enforcement officer (LEOs): An individual commissioned to protect their community and its citizens, and enforce the laws determined by the jurisdiction in which they serve (Zumbrun, 2022).

Occupational stress: Workplace-activated biological, chemical, physiological, and psychological responses to the demands of policing (Dunn, 2020; Edwards et al., 2021; Wassermann et al., 2018).

Organizational stress: Workplace-activated biological, chemical, physiological, and psychological responses to the demands of the policing organization (Dunn, 2020; Edwards et al., 2021; Wassermann et al., 2018).

Work–family conflict: Strife that occurs when the demands of work and home bidirectionally influence one another resulting in conflict (Qureshi et al., 2016).

Assumptions

I assumed that the study participants were actively commissioned LEOs employed by U.S. police departments that were controlled by local government, county sheriff's offices, state law enforcement agencies, federal law enforcement agencies, and

university/college police departments with the responsibility of enforcing the law and ensuring citizens' welfare. This assumption was necessary because the study focused on LEOs. The child or children of the LEO was assumed to be 17 years of age or younger. This assumption was necessary to avoid restrictions of working with special populations. The child or children were not interviewed for this study. Only the police officer (the parent of the child or children) was interviewed for this study. The participating LEOs were assumed to have responded to the interview questions honestly and truthfully. I assumed that the participants in this study voluntarily engaged in the study. These assumptions were necessary for collecting reliable and valid data to interpret the results.

Scope and Delimitations

The organizational and operational stressors LEOs experience in their jobs can not only negatively affect them but can also affect individuals who reside in the officer's home (Pooley & Turns, 2022). Occupation-specific stressors can contribute challenges to work–family conflict, mental health, and maladaptive behaviors. In conducting this study, I did not seek to highlight the causes of work–family conflict or to outline specific causes of mental illness in LEOs following an on-duty child death.

Further, the aim of this study was not to understand the joint parenting styles in a law enforcement intimate relationship, partnership, or marriage. I explored changes in parenting following an on-duty child death. The outcome, parenting experience changes, was selected because it was feasible to obtain this type of information through a semistructured interview with participants who understood the nuances of their behaviors and parenting styles.

One boundary of the study was that it involved working singularly with LEOs. Mental health affects officers in varying facets of life and is a vital part of the policing function within a community (Varker et al., 2022). Because the focus of this study was on LEOs and their parenting style changes, LEOs who did not have children were excluded. LEOs with children older than 17 years of age were also excluded from the study as my focused was parenting experience changes in children.

I chose the theoretical framework, work–family conflict, for the study based on the focus of the study, which involved the influence of stress across multiple domains of work and family. I chose work–family conflict to further explore the bidirectional nature of conflict on the LEO from work to the family and the family to work. The nature of this conflict was assumed to be influenced by the type of conflict an officer experiences while on-duty. The results of this study could potentially be generalized to parents who either work in or have a partner who works in other high-stress occupations. This would include other first responders, military members, paramedics, EMTs, firefighters, detention officers, security guards, trauma surgeons, trauma nurses, and emergency room doctors and nurses.

Limitations

A potential limitation to the current study is that it did not involve consideration of the LEO spouse's perspective of the LEO's change in parenting experience following an on-duty child death. The spouse or partner of the officer also experiences the potential change in the parenting style of an officer following an potentially traumatic experience

while on duty. They might notice changes in the officer even though the officer has little insight into their thinking patterns, behaviors, and emotional states.

In addition, I did not consider how the parenting style of the spouse is intertwines with the potential parenting changes of the LEO. Insight into the parenting style of the LEO's spouse or partner could provide valuable information about their perception of the LEO's parenting and their own parenting experience as both individuals play roles in the dynamic of the family and parenting practices. The focus on one parent within the parenting relationship offers a narrower view of the multifaceted familial relationship dynamic.

Furthermore, I focused on one type of traumatic event an LEO might experience while on duty. There are multiple ways in which an LEO could experience a child death while on duty. The death could be the result of an accident like a vehicle crash. The death could be the result of intentional harm like murder or manslaughter in a mass shooting. Further, the death could be the result of less traumatic means like sudden infant death syndrome or accidental suffocation. This study's focus was on the general experience of an on-duty child death, which encompassed all manners of death. The broad approach of this study could limit the understanding of the impact that certain types of child deaths have on officer's family lives.

A potential barrier was gaining access to the law enforcement community. The law enforcement community can be private and can have a mistrust of outsiders; however, I had several professional connections to the police community that were distinct and separate to my service as a police officer or my spouse's service as a police

officer, and these relationships opened opportunities as well as fostered receptiveness to the study. I anticipated no potential bias based on these connections.

Significance

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the parenting experiences that LEOs use or change when they have experienced a traumatic incident at work, specifically a child death. Researchers have examined officers' mental health symptoms, stressors they encounter on the job, and vicarious trauma in officers and their spouses (Gharibian, 2014; Haecker, 2017; Jetelina, 2020; Wheeler, 2021). Researchers have elaborated on the bidirectional nature of work and family conflict, focusing on the stressors officers experience and how they influence the family as well as the stressors within the family unit influencing the officer (Duxbury et al., 2021). A gap in the research literature existed, however, in that other researchers had not looked at the perceptions and lived experiences of officers regarding their parenting after the officers experienced an on-duty child death. This study provides insight into this dynamic so that mental health clinicians, chaplains, peer support programmers, and leaders police agencies can better identify how to implement targeted mental health treatment for officers and their families following exposure to extremely traumatic events.

This study may be pertinent to police psychologists and licensed mental health providers who work therapeutically with officers and their families. Its findings may also be useful to contracting professionals who provide assessment services for entrance-level psychological evaluations as well as fitness for duty evaluations as part of post on-duty crisis counseling. Implications for police departments would include helping to inform

organizational changes to existing mental health services and potential peer support or critical incident command services provided to officers and their families.

Culturally, this study provides more insight than previously provided in research into LEOs as they engage within their child or children following an on-duty child death and about the ways in which they perceive their parenting and changes in their parenting related to experiencing an on-duty child death. Additionally, this study has the potential to influence departmental policies and procedures for policing agencies in the way they approach the mental health treatment provided to officers and how the family unit can be a focus of future research. Additionally, other professionals including mental health professionals working with the police population could benefit from the results of this study.

Summary

This chapter began with an introduction in which I addressed the topic of the study, why the study was needed, and the study's potential social change implications. In the Background section, I summarized the literature related to the study topic. I also identified the gap in current literature to emphasize the need for the study. In the Problem Statement section, I addressed the multimodal impact of police occupational stress on LEOs' mental health, work–family conflict, and familial vicarious trauma. In the Purpose of the Study section, I identified the study's methodology as a qualitative. This section was followed by one containing the research question about parenting changes in LEOs and their perspective of those changes following an on-duty child death. The interview questions I posed to participants were also included. The Theoretical Framework section

addressed how work–family conflict was an appropriate framework for the study. The Nature of the Study section included an explanation of the rationale for conducting semistructured interviews to explore parenting style changes following an on-duty child death. The Definitions section include definitions of relevant terms used within the study. In the Assumptions section, I clarified aspects of the study critical to its meaning. The Scope and Delimitations section included discussion of the study's focal topic and population. The Limitations section addressed research design limits and potential biases. The Significance section of the study addressed its potential contributions to clinical psychology, LEOs, and its potential for social change. In the last section, I provided a summary of the chapter and a transition to Chapter 2 in which I present the literature search strategy, the theoretical foundation, and a literature review addressing key concepts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The career of an LEO has a lengthy history of being associated with a multiplicity of distinctive challenges that can leave a substantial impression on the professional and personal life of the police officer. As a result of these challenges, much of the research on LEOs has been focused on police stress, strategies for addressing stressors, the rates of suicide, substance abuse, and the experience of vicarious trauma and PTSD in LEOs and appropriate interventions for addressing these issues (Anders et al., 2022; Burns & Buchanan, 2020; Krishnan et al., 2022; Pooley & Turns, 2022; Soomro & Yanos, 2019; Syed et al., 2020).

In recent years, LEOs have been thrust into the public opinion spotlight as the advent of smart phones and social media has allowed topics like police aggression and police response to mass shootings, like the Uvalde, Texas school shooting, to become the focus of conversation for police reform at the state and federal level. The shootings in Uvalde, Texas were a result of a young adult entering an unsecured door at an elementary school campus, opening fire on elementary aged children and their teachers, fatally wounding 19 children and two teachers. As a result, current research demonstrates a shift of focus to how the stressors of work affect an officer while on and off duty (i.e., societal criticism of police response following the Uvalde shooting) (Fayyad et al., 2021; Keerthi and Reddi, 2016), how their family stressors influence their work (Dusbury et al., 2021), and how police departments can continue to assist their officers through health and wellness programs, peer support, clinical services, and chaplains. Therefore, the problem

addressed in this research was the lack of qualitative studies on the parenting experiences of LEOs in terms of their parenting experience changes in response to an on-duty child death. Throughout this study, I use the term "law enforcement officers" because it is in line with the literature.

Before delving into the results of the literature review, this researcher outlined the research strategies used to procure this information. A review of work–family conflict theory and a historical perspective of police stress was also presented providing insight into the differences among police stressors and how multiple factors have influenced police officer's perceptions of work-related stress and addressed this juxtaposition in relationship to the family. Additionally, this provided insight into how LEOs perceive and address family-related stress in relationship to their careers. Often, definitions and perceptions of those pressures associated with a career in law enforcement may become comingled and ambiguous.

It can be difficult to tease out what specific events an LEO experiences that may uniquely impact them and their families. The question becomes how each potentially traumatic event influences LEOs and their interactions with their families. The remainder of this literature review below focused on uncovering key research that explored definitions of parenting styles, the bidirectional nature of work–family conflict as related to LEOs and their families, and specific occupational stressors as encountered by law enforcement personnel within both historical and current contexts. The review provided a better understanding of the stressors inherent in policing and potentially traumatic events officer's encounter.

Literature Search Strategy

Many of the necessary peer-reviewed articles for this literature review were procured using Walden University Library's online databases. Academic Search Complete and PsycINFO were databases most often accessed using the general search terms *police* and *trauma* as the root of all inquiries. This researcher used other search terms such as *law enforcement, PTSD, mental health, stigma, cope, coping, death,* and *family* to ensure that all avenues were explored during the research phase of this project. Those articles located using these databases were supplemented by additional references found through a review of the sources used by previous authors. This researcher located scant research that addressed unique events associated with trauma in police work and the effects of these events on police officers' families. Hence, the contents of this review are limited to the definitions and the impact of the trauma and occupational exposure experienced by LEOs, in addition to reviewing the stressors and potentially traumatic events associated with policing.

Theoretical Framework

The development of a proper framework represented an important step towards implementing this phenomenological study as that context was structured from broad ideas to help properly identify the issue under study, define the concepts being examined, and frame and provide clarity to those research questions being set forth. The concepts being explored are representative of the perceptions of parenting experience changes following the potentially traumatic event of an on-duty child death. This study was framed according to work–family conflict, which suggests that occupational stress

impacts LEOs and subsequently impacts the family unit. The theory further posits LEOs' family stress collides with their profession, influencing how they perform at work (Fayyad et al., 2021; Keerthi and Reddi, 2016). A broad view of work–family conflict theory was included in the review below establishing the lens through which this study approached stressors in law enforcement, potentially traumatic events, parenting, and the perceptions of officer's parenting changes following the experience of an on-duty child death.

Historical Perspective on Work–Family Conflict Theory

For the study's theoretical base, I drew from the work–family conflict theory of human development. The work–family conflict theory can be defined as

> a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role. (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77).

The theory is a relatively recent addition to theories of work stress becoming much more popular after the 1970s when households began to see a rise in two-income earners. Because of the shift from collectivism to individualism, individuals began balancing the demands of work and family as they occupied multiple roles. Occupying multiple roles was both personally beneficial and detrimental. Ego satisfaction, becoming individually autonomous, and deriving meaning became beneficial to the individual worker. Individuals experienced role strain, psychological distress, and somatic

complaints as they embraced more individuality in the work force (Pogessi & De Vita, 2019).

An important determinant of psychological well-being, or distress, in work–family conflict is the subjective experience of the individual in their work role. Experiencing work as enjoyable and rewarding can lessen the strain on family, but work experienced as demanding or unrewarding can increase the strain on the family. Another potential byproduct of work strain is the individual's performance at work. The more demanding and unrewarding the work, the more absenteeism, less productive, and higher turnover that can be a result for employees (Pogessi & DeVita, 2019).

Early studies of work–family strain in the mid-1980s focused on the idea as a singular construct. As research progressed into the middle of the 1990s, the construct became bidirectional, work–family conflict (work interference with family) and family–work conflict (family interference with work). This bidirectional focus provided a clearer understanding of the effects of the strain of roles in both domains of life as they influence each other (Casper et al., 2018). The early 2000s focused on further defining the variables associated with work–family conflict and defined the construct of enrichment and the absence of conflict as balance in both family and work (Pogessi & DeVita, 2019). Other researchers focused on the demands in both realms met by the resources available in both realms and not as linear as previous researchers believed (Casper et al., 2018). Further, researchers have examined how work–family conflict and family–work conflict differed through the way each were measured among different domains in each role. For example, work-spouse, work-parent, or work-household chores thus expanding the bidirectional

model (Pogessi & DeVita, 2019. Researchers would go on to develop work–family conflict scales inquiring about many different facets of family life and work life (Casper et al., 2018).

Core Concepts and Major Assumptions

Conflict can be explained as the conflict between work and various areas of family life and family and various areas of work life that correlate with each other and excludes individual attitudes about work or family. The core concepts established for this theory consider conflict as being dynamic and occurring within two systems: work and family. Work–family conflict arose from primarily three major theoretical models: ecological systems theory, role theory, and boundary/border theory. Major assumptions of work–family conflict include conflict being created through involvement in multiple, individual roles, incompatible pressures from family and work, conflict occurs from work to family or family to work, the influence of conflict is correlational and not causal, and the strength of the relationship among individual domains depends on the observed area (Pogessi & DeVita, 2019; Casper et al., 2018).

Strengths of Work–Family Conflict

There are many strengths to consider of work–family conflict. One such strength is the testability of the theory. Primarily, behavior can be observed. As a result, the work–family conflict theory is grounded in research that examines multiple dimensions of work–family conflict and family–work conflict (Bellavia & Frone, 2005; Fields, 2002). This approach to the theory has permitted researchers to consider work–family conflict and family–work conflict from multiple variables, measuring the strength of the

relationship among those variables. Moreover, the theory is soundly based on three different theoretical models which provides for a solid multidimensional approach that can provide for moderators of conflict in both areas of an individual's life, work, and family (Bellavia & Frone, 2005; Fields, 2002).

Weaknesses of Work–Family Conflict

Weaknesses of work–family conflict theory include issues researching the directionality of conflict and criteria validity when examining specific variables. For example, historically when measuring work–family conflict, the measure has focused on cognitions but when measuring family–work conflict, the measure focuses on emotions. Work–family conflict represents a relatively new theory, and such as exists with new theories, issues of diversity have yet to be fully explored. The role of culture in work–family conflict and family–work conflict has not yet been addressed. Cultural context is one of many components that operate within a system, and it proves difficult to focus on specific domains when using a narrow approach as has been used in the past.

Summary of Work–Family Conflict

In summation, the work–family conflict theory has roots in the expansion of industrialization in developing countries. At the core of work–family conflict, conflict is defined as arising from the interplay of roles from work to family and from family to work. The theory has been established as a well-tested approach grounded in research. Although culture is not addressed specifically, the theory respects the individualism and diversity that go beyond the characteristics of the status quo. Finally, even though originating from primarily three different major theories, this theory has been utilized to

address a variety of issues related to individuals and their participation in different roles in life. The potential and versatility of this approach in explaining the role of strain on the individual from work to family is what makes work–family conflict theory the appropriate instrument for initiating an exploration of the delicate topic of an officer experiencing an on-duty child death and the effect of that death on their parenting with their child or children.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

Characteristics of Police Departments

Before exploring stress in police work, potentially traumatic events in policing, and work–family conflict related to policing, recent literature outlining the construction of police agencies to consider the uniqueness of police agencies and the nature of their work was explored. Law enforcement agencies exist throughout the world with most responsible for patrolling and responding to and investigating crime. For the purpose of this study, the law enforcement agencies existing in the United States were the primary focus of the agencies referenced. These law enforcement agencies include jurisdictions that often overlap (i.e., municipal, county, state, federal). The most recent data on the number of police agencies that exist throughout the country was distributed by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2016. The Office of Justice Programs' Bureau of Justice Statistics reflects the 15,322 general-purpose law enforcement agencies dispersed throughout the United States during 2016 employed approximately 701,000 full-time sworn officers; local police departments comprising 80% of this group which employed 67% full-time sworn officers (Hyland & Davis, 2019). These police agencies can receive

a variety of calls for service depending on the location of the agency (i.e., rural vs. urban) and purpose of the agency (i.e., municipal police department vs. the Federal Bureau of Investigations). Within these simplistic statistics lies the experiences and the very nature of the work LEOs encounter day in and day out. These experiences have the potential to leave their imprint on officers long after they have ended. This study focused on municipal, county, and state law enforcement agencies. The types of stressors experienced by LEOs can be dependent on the nature of the agency they are employed with (e.g., urban vs. rural). Elkins (2019) notes more rural policing agencies face stressors related to recruitment and the subsequent lack of manpower needed to perform essential duties whereas urban policing agencies can struggle with different stressors.

Stress in Police Work

The stressors and the nature of those stressors in policing have been the focus of volumes of research conducted over the past several decades (Rajeswari & Chalam, 2018; Warner et al., 2019; Wasserman et al., 2018). In his study on police stress during the 1st year of policing, Eaton (2022) notes Drabek (1969), is one of the earliest researchers to explore the pressures experienced in policing, elaborating the concept of stress was known and felt by police officers but the terminology in the literature was vastly limited. Eaton (2022) discusses the intricacies of the 1970s referencing the transitional nature of the war in Vietnam as the number of troops were diminishing overseas and returning home. Further, the wounds and scars of the riots from the 1960s were very fresh, and the United States was very fragile. This was also coupled with the economic uncertainty that left many in the United States facing multiple stressors at any

given time. Eaton (2022) goes on to explain literature regarding police stress began to burgeon in the later 1970s and focused on defining police stress, acknowledging the unique nature of stress in policing, and the beginnings of the exploration into the dynamics of police stress, noting Symonds (1970) initial work outlining stress as dichotomous in policing functioning as organizational and operational stressors.

The coming decades, Eaton (2022) noted, would bring a dearth of curiosity in the literature surrounding this newly discovered dichotomy of stressors and peculiarity of those stressors as related to the LEO. Eaton (2022) goes on to discuss the diversity of law enforcement stressors, noting Rajeswari and Chalam's (2018) work creating categories of stressors in law enforcement such as inherent stressors in police work, internal stressors emanating from within police departments, societal and systematic stressors from external systems, and stressors individual officers face. Eaton (2022) added to the more recent literature on police stress, going deeper into the phenomenon of police stress, examining how an LEO in their 1st year of police service experienced stress. His findings highlight LEOs in their 1st year of service reporting a feeling of a lack of control due to the type of potentially traumatic event they encountered while on-duty and the influence of personal stressors on their ability to perform their duties as an LEO (i.e., financial burdens, pregnancy, lack of familial support). Another researcher, Warner (2019), established categories of police stressors and how these stressors interact with one another related to police agency size. Other recent research has begun to explore the influence of stress in the interpersonal lives of officers including their intimate

relationships and families (Friese, 2020; Lambert et al, 2021; Nisar et al., 2018; Varker et al., 2022; Violanti et al., 2017).

Warner (2019) recently established how impactful the size of a law enforcement agency on each type of stressor continuing the distinguishing of stressors as categories independently influential. This is evidence of the modern endeavor grounded in the pioneering work of researchers for decades to define stressors uniquely related to policing and categorically determine their influence on LEOs. Bishopp et al. (2019) utilized general strain theory to learn about the stressors urban police officers experienced and found higher levels of reported stress.

The study of police stress has evolved throughout the decades highlighting researcher's endeavors to define police stress as unique to the function of police work. The pioneers of research in this field who took an interest in defining the vocabulary surrounding police stress to the continued efforts found in modern research into the complexities of police stress all exemplify the vast interest into the psychology of the field of policing particularly around how a police officer experiences their job. This experiential shift in the literature brightens the future for researchers in this field to better understand the intricate and complex nature of organizational and operational stressors LEOs experience beginning their 1st year throughout their career (Eaton, 2022; Madamet et al., 2018; Plazas, 2018; Simmons, 2018).

Prior research on the influence of police stress has been invaluable to those set forth on the path of exploring perceptions of stress in LEOs. A review of the literature continues to stress that a gap exists as parenting styles of LEOs goes unexplored in terms

of the effects of those stressors and critical incidents related to policing on the parenting style of the police officer. Since prior research has established that these pressures tend to lead to considerable personality and behavioral changes that have the potential for careering altering consequences and distress within the officer's family, it seems obvious exploration of how LEOs experience different types of potentially traumatic events would benefit the literature. With that said, the scope of research needs to be narrowed as a means of yielding a maximum benefit to police populations. Exploration of this largely ignored area should add much to an already established reserve of knowledge base related to the impact of police stress from potentially traumatic events on officers. Notwithstanding these shifts to account for a more thorough examination of police stress, a review of the literature underscored that a gap exists in understanding the types of potentially traumatic experiences officers encounter in their jobs and how those experiences influence their children. This blind spot represented the study of the experience of an on-duty child death and how officers could experience a change in their parenting style following this experience, an area worthy of further exploration.

Potentially Traumatic Events or Critical Incidents in Policing

The literature review revealed a critical need for further exploration of potentially traumatic events, their impact, and how they are addressed in police populations. with critical incidents in the literature. Parameters for defining potentially traumatic events and measures for assessing their nature and impact are lacking. There has been extensive discussion in the literature, but have they have not received adequate empirical examination. Additionally, I found, and the vocabulary for discussing these events is

limited. The literature review represented the current understanding of these events in policing.

It has been established officers on average witness 188 critical incidents during their careers as LEOs (Carleton et al., 2019). In the past four decades, a deeper understanding of the nature of policing and the types of incidents they endure has come into the focus of the public exposing the very nature of the work they do. Media, social media, and podcasts have brought attention to critical incidents LEOs face as the attention draws numbers for ratings and monetary gain. Television, media, social media, and telephones along with dash cams and body worn cameras have given rise to the opportunity to view incident from other's perspectives but most important to this study, from the officer's perspective.

Research into potentially traumatic events of first responders has evolved over the decades. Earlier research investigated potentially traumatic events and critical incidents of first responders as whole without looking at individual differences (Chopko, 2015). Research eventually came to recognize the potentiality that differences could exist between categories of first responders and began to focus on teasing out critical incidents and potentially traumatic events among nomothetic and idiographic means eventually finding both the experience of a potentially traumatic event and the type of potentially traumatic event relevant and equal considerations (Barnette et. al., 2022; Brazil, 2017; Carleton et al., 2019; Chopko et al., 2015; Weiss et al, 2010). Amendola et al., 2019) explored the impact of stressors on the spouses of police officers developing a scale to

identify the impact of potentially traumatic events as disclosed with LEO's spouses and trauma they experience due to this.

One study, conducted by Durson et al. (2014), examined professionals working with child abuse cases and their parenting attitudes as well as the psychological well-being of their children. Durson et al. (2014) studied the parenting attitudes of caseworkers, psychiatrists, nurses, prosecutors, LEOs, and juvenile probation officers working with child abuse cases in Turkey. They further studied their psychological well-being. Regarding parenting, they used the Parental Attitude Research Instrument which defined parenting in categories like overprotective parenting, democratic parenting, denial of housewife roles, marital discord, and authoritarian parenting. They found LEOs who worked with child abuse cases to demonstrate stricter more authoritarian parenting strategies as well as more democratic attitudes than their other colleagues. More importantly, they point to the difficulty in explaining those results as the reliable scientific evidence for comparison was available as the literature had not adequately provided a comparison.

Officers' Perceptions of Potentially Traumatic Events

The American Psychiatric Association (2013) mentions that an event becomes potentially traumatic when an individual experiences indirect or direct exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Oliphant (2016) defined a public safety personnel as someone who works as a correctional officer, dispatcher, firefighter, paramedic, or police officer. The recent addition of the cumulative experience of potentially traumatic events to the *Diagnostic*

and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5-TR (2022) benefits those who are in these types of professions, Oliphant (2016) noted. Anecdotally, research has historically purported that first responders experience more potentially traumatic events than a civilian would in their lifetime and has cited 50%-90% of civilians experience at least one potentially traumatic event in their lifetime. It is reasonable to presume LEOs experience more critical incidents than civilians. However, the literature remains sparse on potentially traumatic events in the lives of civilians and the lives of LEOs.

The literature distinguishes a potentially traumatic event from a critical incident by defining a critical incident as a problematic incident that can cause an officer to experience strong emotions that might interfere with their job duties or life following the event (i.e., foot chase, vehicle pursuits, motor vehicle accidents, etc.). Inherent in the literature is an overlap between these two areas, however, a critical incident does not meet the standard mentioned above by the American Psychiatric Association (2013). Corneil et al. (1999) found 90% of Canadian and American firefighters were exposed to one potentially traumatic event in the past year of service, those events mainly being death by suicide and other graphic, deadly tragedies. In a more recent study, Carleton et al. (2019) asked firefighters; dispatchers; paramedics; correctional officers; and provincial, municipal, and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers to identify the most potentially traumatic event they had encountered. Respondents noted sudden violent death, sudden accidental death, and serious transportation accident. Municipal, provincial, and Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers identified sudden violent death as the worst potentially traumatic event.

Weis et al. (2010) created the Critical Incident History Questionnaire and indexed critical incidents based on severity and exposure. Among the list of incidents an officer could be exposed to, it is of interest that experiencing a child death, whether violent or nonviolent, was not on the list specifically and only mention of a child severely neglected, severely beaten, or sexually abused was on the questionnaire. Casas et al. (2022) examined the trauma narratives of LEOs and found almost all the narratives of LEOs included depictions of responding to a pediatric death and that death as having affected them. Carleton et al. (2019) pointed out a potentially traumatic event questionnaire lacking in the literature that has sufficient validity and reliability features. These researchers point to a continued gap in the literature regarding exploration into features of the types of death LEOs experience and further, how the experience of those deaths affect their lives beyond mere symptomology.

Research has pointed out the differences between potentially traumatic events and critical incidents that civilians and first responders can experience over time. Further, that first responders experience potentially traumatic events because of the nature of the work they do, and they experience potentially traumatic events at a rate higher than the civilian population. The nature of potentially traumatic events as they relate to the experience of the police officer remains an area in the literature that needs exploration.

Influence on Mental Health

PTSD, major depressive disorder, and panic disorder are all possible sequelae to being singularly exposed to critical incidents or exposed cumulatively (Carleton et all., 2019). Not all first responders, including LEOs, go on to develop mental health

symptoms related to these disorders after being exposed to a potentially traumatic event. Inherent in the name is the potential for the development of such disorders but not the certainty of. Researchers have explored the influence of potentially traumatic events on LEOs over several decades and have found public safety personnel (i.e., LEOs, firefighters, and paramedics) report substantial difficulties with clinically significant symptoms of one or more mental disorders (Carleton et al., 2019).

Other researchers have looked at major disasters and the rates of mental disorders over time. Reghr et al. (2021) systematically reviewed the research on the rates of PTSD, depression, and panic disorder following major events LEOs responded to (i.e., World Trade Center, airplane crashes, major hurricanes, explosions, etc.). Among their review, they found one study that highlighted the rates of PTSD, panic disorder, and depression to rise over a period of 10 years and the importance for police departments and mental health authorities to consider this rise in providing resources to their officers over the long-term (Reghr et al., 2021).

The exposure to potentially traumatic events on LEOs was further studied through the trauma narratives of 30 LEOs attending trauma therapy (Casas et al., 2022). Specific symptomology following the report of cumulative exposure to potentially traumatic events were reported by LEOs and included a cascade of changes they viewed in themselves and their home lives. Specific symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety included amotivation, fatigue, sleep disturbances, irritability, appetite changes, hyperarousal, and difficulty in interpersonal relationships that all were reported to affect their well-being. Several of the LEOs reported leaving their intimate relationship due to

the symptoms they were experiencing from the potentially traumatic events experienced in their job. The effects of the symptoms of mental disorders due to the potentially traumatic events LEOs encounter can be seen trickling down into their interpersonal relationships.

Suicide. The representation of the rates of suicide in LEOs as presented in the literature and shown through governmental agencies, like the Federal Bureau of Investigations Uniformed Crime Reports, has historically been varied and ambiguous. Police departments are solely responsible for reporting the rate of suicide within their department to the Federal Bureau of Investigations and it has been suggested in the literature the lack of providing accurate numbers could be due to various reasons including embarrassment, shame, and mental health stigma. The literature has addressed police suicide from different angles including risk factors, the rates of suicide as compared to the general population, the method and means by which officers commit suicide, among others. One recent article by Krishnan et al. (2022) qualitatively reviewed the literature addressing risk factors for police suicide and found several contributing factors. Krishnan et al. (2022) found substance use prior to or close to the time of death, trauma responses differences, comorbid mental health issues, the absence of a stable and intimate relationship, and prolonged exposure to job-related stress to be risk factors for police suicide. The following section provides a brief overview of the history of defining and understanding parenting through the literature.

Parenting

Historically, parenting can be seen as a function of survival. Procreation is the first task and then ensuring the survival of the offspring to continue the species. In more primitive or simpler societies, parenting ends sooner, in the earlier childhood years as fundamental tasks of survival are the focus of rearing a child including activities like searching for food (Baumrind, 1971). In more modern societies, parenting continues into the older childhood years. The overarching goal for both societies is combination of nature and nurture to further the survival of the next generations. Across the globe, parents have struggled with many influences on the parenting relationship including economic hardship, ill physical and mental health, the dispersant of the extended family, separation and repartnering, emergence of the urban society with many external influences, mothers working out of the home, and demands of work conflicting with the family (Newman, 2018).

Parenting has continued to evolve over the past half-century. Newman (2018) mentioned the number of households having children has decreased for several reasons. One reason is the increasing number of women pursuing careers, within their own right, outside of the home. Further, the economic drain of having children as the more financial resources it takes as the number of children increase. Another reason is individuals choosing not to have children and the associated decrease in stigma. Despite these circumstances, individuals continue to desire and remain motivated to having children as can be seen in the rise in fertility services. The goal of raising children continues to be producing physically and emotionally healthy children, that assurance of care for parents

as they age and care for the aged as a society, the contribution of a more meaningful and purposeful existence, and transferring generational values and skills (Newman, 2018).

References to parenting in writings and drawing have existed for centuries. Religion, culture, and economics eventually became the responsible for formalizing the parental relationship. Children have long been revered as fragile and vulnerable and childhood seen as a special, developmental time of life. Beginning in the 18th century, children became viewed as individuals and distinct beings (Newman, 2018). Male labor, beginning more in the 18th century, naturally assumed women would provide care for the children at home while men worked out of the home. In the 19th century, child abuse became more publicly known and the view of how parenting took place by women in the home began to change. Most developing governments recognized children had rights, or should have, and societies shifted their laws to accommodate ensuring children were protected, should receive a life free from abuse, and receive positive development. Parenting became a focus of children's issues and the recognition that parenting was a major contributor to the outcome of mentally and physically healthy children (Newman, 2018).

In the 20th century, Freud studied parenting in the context of children's social development influencing their later adjustment in adulthood (Newman, 2018). Later in the 20th century, parenting became a construct quantitatively researched and the fields of child psychiatry and psychology emerged. Eric Erikson created a framework for understanding development throughout the lifespan through observations of an individual's culture and context (Newman, 2018). In the late 1930s the second World

War unfolded, and research shifted through Bowlby's work on children being removed from their urban homes to more rural homes, motherless homes, and attachment. Research on the topic of parenting increased in later decades and in the 1970s emerged as its own discipline of study through the work of Bornstein (Newman, 2018).

Although Bowlby's work on attachment was groundbreaking, there were considerable flaws. Winnicott corrected some of these flaws be reducing parenting to a good enough concept and asserted individuals should provide consistent, reliable care, unconditional love, and a safe place for a child to learn resilience. Ainsworth extended Bowlby's attachment concept and relayed the outcome of good parenting is the secure attachment of the child. Bronfenbrener focused more on parenting practices (Newman, 2018). He asserted the interaction between the parent's relationships, economic circumstances, culture, and the societal and political environment shape the effectiveness of parenting. As parents experience more, they increasingly grow in their parenting practices (Allen, 2023).

Baumrind (1971) introduced two dimensions to parenting, control exerted and responsiveness to the child. Demandingness includes behavioral control and parental monitoring (parents controlling how children behave) and parental expectations of mature behavior from their children. Responsiveness includes parental affections, support, and warmth response to children when needed. Out of these dimensions, Baumrind identified three types of parenting styles. Authoritarian (high control low responsiveness), authoritative (high control and high responsiveness), and permissive (low control high responsiveness) were added first and the fourth parenting style, neglectful, was added

later and identified as being representative of low control and low responsiveness. In summary, understanding of parenting has evolved over decades of research and has historically defined parenting in terms of styles influenced over time by a more thorough examination of attachment styles and responses. Many major theorists and pioneers in the field have studied and examined the engagement of parents with their children and defined those interactions through parenting styles.

Summary and Conclusions

Research has shown that occupational stress is quite prevalent among LEOs, resulting in several detrimental outcomes including poor job performance, maladaptive behaviors, personality change, and so forth. Moreover, it is known that when LEOs encounter stress, they are likely to implement a variety of coping strategies, both health and unhealthy. It has further been established through the literature that LEOs encounter potentially traumatic events experienced as occupational stressors that influence the way they function in their professional and personal lives. These events have been found to influence their mental health and well-being through the development of PTSD, panic disorder, major depression, suicidal ideation and suicidal plans, and substance abuse. Through work–family conflict theory, the literature has outlined LEOs experience organizational and operational stressors that influence their family life, and their family life influences their job duties. The literature has further defined parenting through the study of attachment styles and evolved through the decades to better understand parenting as evidenced through the function of behavioral styles. What has not been established, however, is how specific potentially traumatic events, like an on-duty child death,

influence a police officer's parenting style. Due to these gaps in the literature, this study focused on this potentially traumatic event and the officer's perception of their parenting experience changes following this event. Chapter 3 provided information on how the study was being conducted, how the participants were identified, the interview questions asked, and how the information was collected, organized, and analyzed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

Law enforcement careers have been associated with experiencing operational and organizational stressors that have historically affected LEO's job performance and burnout rates throughout their career. Over the past decade, social media, media, and the public's interest in the field of law enforcement has brought considerable awareness to issues within police work. These views have impacted LEOs and influenced how they interact in their communities, perceive, and cope with job-related pressures, and generally cope over time. LEOs have developed adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms in response to the stressors experienced on the job. Further, the influence of familial stressors on the job performance of LEOs has shown a bidirectional nature of the types of stressors outside of the realm of policing that can affect police officer's performance.

Until recently, most of the literature bringing attention to the influences of work and home in a police officer's life has focused on the impact of those stressors on job performance, burnout, resilience, relationships with spouses or partners, and the influence of stress on coping styles of their children. Therefore, the problem of this research addressed the lack of qualitative studies on the experiences, perceptions, and understanding of parenting style changes unique to an officer experiencing an on-duty child death. Work–family conflict theory provided additional insight into these undeveloped areas. In Chapter 3, this researcher described the qualitative method she used to explore and illuminate the experiences and perceptions associated with the targeted population.

Research Design and Rationale

The purpose of this study was to determine how LEOs experience and perceive changes in their parenting styles following an on-duty child death. Only officers currently serving full-time, with a child or children, were selected. The broad, overarching RQs developed to better understand the participants' experiences were as follows:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of LEOs who have experienced a child death on duty?

RQ2: Did LEOs experience a perceived change in their parenting as a result of an on-duty child death response?

RQ3: For LEOs who had experienced an on-duty child death, what parenting strategies did they adapt from that exposure?

A qualitative methodology was selected as the means of analyzing the research topic. There are many reasons for incorporating a qualitative design in this study and they include the exploration of the experiences of involved participants and the meaning they give them, the potentiality for the discovery of relevant variables that may be examined in the future using alternative designs, and the ability to take a naturalistic approach to the research topic. The appeal of utilizing qualitative measures is based on the closeness of the researcher to the participants. According to Belotto (2018) researchers who utilize qualitative measures desire to discover the everyday concerns of people's lives and understand them in a way that ultimately betters their lives. Such an approach heavily relies on the researcher as the primary observer of the phenomena and collector of data.

A qualitative approach to research allows one to engage in a design that is dynamic and fluid, with more options for flexibility in relation to the participant. As the participant changes, so does the observer. Other methods of inquiry are rigid and inflexible lending less ability to engage in dynamism throughout the research process. When considering qualitative design, the researcher should consider the primary goal of the research inquiry and then what instrument would fit the research inquiry. For this research project, this researcher used semistructured interviews and direct observation as the primary qualitative tools of inquiry. The researcher used these methods to gather, organize, and analyze the data obtained. As with generally most qualitative inquiry, the qualitative process began with an inductive approach to research method whose primary interest includes observation and exploration. As the researcher analyzed the data collected, deductive reasoning was blended to review the data obtained to determine if the researcher should engage in gathering additional information.

The recent trend in psychology to recognize the critical component of research methods in psychological concepts that provides for the understanding and inclusion of cultural and social aspects can be captured through the qualitative approach. This is the reason this approach best suited this research design as it was conducive to the work–family conflict theory approach, which was the theoretical framework for the study. A phenomenological approach was conducive to the core concepts of this approach as it allowed the researcher to descriptively represent the perceptions of parenting style changes as the LEOs experienced them following an on-duty child death. A phenomenological approach also provided the researcher to gather data from the

experiences of LEOs and describe their experiences through police officer's own descriptions of the phenomenon. Through the data collected, the research provided for a comprehensive depiction of the participants as a whole.

Other qualitative designs were considered but did not fit the explicit intent of this study. For example, a case study was considered as it could have provided an opportunity to explore one, direct case and experience but inherent in that design was the limitation of only exploring one or two participant's experience. That singular limitation would not provide for a rich, collective of experiences to be explored. This study necessitated that information be collected from a larger group of participants to provide depth and inclusion to better interpret the data. The primary objective of a case study is to analyze and interpret the data to uncover theoretical framework as related to information gleaned from the participant. That design style was not the primary goal of this study. A case study design requires the researcher to examine one or two participants and positions the researcher as the theoretical examiner. The goal of this study was to explore a specific phenomenon among several participants, as the participants experienced it. The ethnographic nature of case studies in qualitative research heavily relies on theoretical orientation and not as much emphasis on the participants and their lived experiences. This study required a participant pool to examine the responses of officers to their children as they experienced a singular incident on duty, a child death, regardless of the type of child death. A case study design would not effectively capture these experiences across the phenomenon. In addition, the participant pool would be too small.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

Qualitative research is best conducted with a group of three to 15 participants (J. L. Johnson et al., 2020). For this study, the participant group comprised eight LEOs, including both women and men. Participants were selected using criterion sampling which required all participants to have experienced the same phenomenon (i.e., on-duty child death) and have one or more children. Criterion sampling was used as a means of intentionally selecting participants with exclusive experience in understanding this phenomenon. This intentionality assisted the researcher in better understanding the phenomenon. Snowball sampling was used to assist this researcher in the event additional individuals are needed after participant selection to locate additional participants. This included prior participants that were involved contacting other individuals who were potential participants. Interviews were conducted until saturation was obtained. The study remained in the confines of researching LEOs who experienced an on-duty child death and had a child or children of their own, whether adopted or biological. The career of police work has been historically associated with occupational stressors and their influence on an officer's performance at work and lives at home. Regher et al. (2021) justified the necessity for further research into the nature of potentially traumatic events and the experience of officers in the interpersonal relationships they have at home.

This researcher contacted the director of the Department of Defense National Narcotics Task Force in Mississippi who conducts the Peer Support program for multiple southern states. The program director is a retired police officer and connected this

researcher with potential candidates for this research. The director was instrumental in connecting this researcher with LEOs who had a child or children and experienced an on-duty child death. A letter describing the study was provided to potential participants through these sources (see Appendix A).

Instrumentation

A semistructured interview protocol was used to collect data for each participant. A location that was agreed upon by both the researcher and participant was used for the interviews. Prior to interviewing each participant, an effort was made to build rapport, review Informed Consent, Statement of Confidentiality, obtain signatures, and review background information. The instrument used for the interview was designed to explore the details of the police officer's experience of an on-duty child death and their perception of parenting style changes with their child or children following this event. The research questions mentioned in Chapter 1 of this study was the basis for these focused questions. Substantial effort was made to conduct the interviews in person. If an officer preferred and due to location constraints, interviews were carried out through an appropriate video teleconferencing platform (i.e., Zoom, Teams). The interview process included this researcher asking a prepared list of open-ended questions and asking additional probing questions to ensure the obtained data represents rich and meaningful sources of information. The time allotted for interviewing was 60–90 min. In some participant's cases, this researcher requested the participant stay longer as obtaining additional information was necessary to ensure data collection was satisfactory. The

nature of this study was sensitive and due to this the researcher remained neutral during the interview process and avoided suggestive comments or response evaluation.

Interviews were recorded via audio, field notes, and audio recorders to ensure transcription was most efficient. When providing informed consent, the requirement of using an audio recording device was thoroughly explained to the participants. Field notes included notations of non-verbal communication like facial expressions, tone, and body movements. Additionally, field notes contained information relevant to the environment that might have influenced the response patterns of the participants.

Informed Consent and the Statement of Confidentiality included details about the use of video and audio recording devices. Belotto (2018) discussed the benefits of using a combination of audio recordings and field notes during qualitative interviews and how to mitigate potential limitations when utilizing these methods. They (Belotto, 2018) discussed relying solely on field notes can set the researcher up for incomplete data collection as field notes only allow the researcher to encounter the material one time. They (Belotto, 2018) further add combining field notes and audio recording can provide for more clear and accurate interview transcripts.

When concluding each interview, this researcher communicated her appreciation and gratitude to the participant for their time and thanked them for their contribution to this study. This researcher informed each participant that they would receive a copy of their transcription that would be mailed by this researcher to each participant interviewed. When audio recording software was used, the interview transcriptions were produced with transcription software, reviewed, and verified by this researcher prior to the

dissemination to the participants. All field notes, transcripts, and audio recordings were locked in a filing cabinet in a secured space of this researcher. All data associated with this study was backed up and stored in a secured location to mitigate data loss or corruption. To ensure confidentiality, all documentation and recordings related to the participants involved in this study was destroyed by this researcher following the completion of this study and as defined by university guidelines.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I followed several procedures to select and inform participants and collect and analyze data. Potential participants will be located via the researcher contacting the individuals responsible for training or recruiting LEOs already serving in the field. A letter providing information about the nature of the study and a copy of the signed informed consent were provided to each participant. Individual interviews were scheduled with selected participants using Zoom or TEAMS. The researcher identified and reviewed the study's intent, the signed Informed Consent, and Statement of Confidentiality at the beginning of each interview. The individual interview was conducted with each participant based on the researcher-designed interview protocol previously mentioned in Chapter 1. The researcher reviewed the interview notes with the participant prior to the completion of the interview. To ensure accuracy, the researcher provided a copy of the interview transcript to each participant to review. A clinical, forensic doctoral graduate student who has completed a qualitative methods course at Walden University assisted the researcher in validating themes extracted from the transcripts. The graduate student adhered to the ethical protection of participants

previously identified in this proposal by signing a confidentiality agreement form before aiding with this study. Upon completion of the research, the researcher provided the results of the study to the participants.

Data Analysis Plan

The researcher focused on understanding and establishing the overarching meaning of the information received during the interview process after the data collection and organization phases of the study. These two steps were imperative to the goal of understanding the phenomenon being studied (Burkholder et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2019). This researcher's experiences related to the areas being studied and explored were communicated directly to the reader. The primary responsibility of this researcher was to highlight any personal experiences of beliefs related to the phenomenon that might have influenced data analysis and interpretation. This was an important process throughout data collection and analysis as it reveals potential prejudices or assumptions that a researcher might possess regarding what they are studying (Burkholder et al., 2020); Miles et al., 2019). The position of the researcher must remain neutral, and this process provides the opportunity to counter potential obstacles and biases (Miles et al., 2019). Each transcript was reviewed by this researcher in its entirety for the researcher to glean a sense of the meaning each participant conveyed.

The next step of data analysis involved developing an inventory deriving ideas, terms, and significant statements that were communicated by the participant during the interview. This inventory described the 'how' behind the participant's experience of the phenomenon. The participant's ideas, statements, and terms guided the researcher toward

meaningful understanding of the perception and experience of parenting style changes in LEOs following an on-duty child death (Miles et al., 2019). Statements, terms, and ideas that were especially noteworthy were transferred to a Microsoft Word document for additional analysis. The statements, terms, and ideas were grouped into themes or meaningful units upon completing the inventory. Information was categorized based on the overall meaning of the statements provided. An integral part of this portion of data analysis was providing the researcher with the opportunity to discard themes and meaning units that had no influence on the participants experience of the phenomenon (Miles et al., 2019).

The final step of data analysis included categorizing the items listed in the inventory (Saldaña, 2021). The researcher designated the themes and meaning units according to the verbal and non-verbal behavioral and emotional expressions that were expressed by the participants. The researcher then used these components to develop more thorough descriptions to provide for the participant's experience as an individual and part of a group. Examples of these multiple experiences and descriptions aided in the accomplishment of this step. This researcher reviewed psychological expressions and then formed individual descriptions. Key patterns were then clustered into a collective description of a group of officers who experienced parenting style changes following the experience of an on-duty child death. The collective shared experience was highlighted through this step (Miles et al., 2019).

The primary goal of a phenomenological study reveals the underlying meaning of the lived and shared experiences of the individuals who have experienced the explored

phenomenon (Miles et al., 2019). This study included LEOs who have a child or children and experienced an on-duty child death and then experienced parenting style changes following this event, ensuring the appropriateness of phenomenological inquiry. The profound insight and understanding of the experience of an on-duty child death by LEOs and parenting style changes was best provided by this data analysis method. Clusters of content were gathered through the diverse base of information procured throughout the interview process. Appropriate measures were taken to eliminate repetitive or irrelevant data. This ensured more efficient and meaningful information in theme construction (Miles et al., 2019). This researcher gained a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied through examining the experiences of the participants. The primary objective of this study was to understand the experiences of an on-duty child death and perceptions of parenting style changes following this experience. Thus, the data analysis technique described above was the most efficient and systematic method to analyze the collected data (Miles et al., 2019).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Member checking and peer review provided for verification of the findings (Belotto 2018; Saldaña, 2021). This allowed for a rich and meaningful representation of the participant' experience of the phenomenon (Saldaña, 2021). This further assisted in eliminating potential researcher bias. Member checking is a process that engages the participant following the interview and allows them to verify the information they provided and interpreted by this researcher was correct (Saldaña, 2021). Data integrity was established through follow-up questions procured by this researcher via the initial

interview's findings. Each participant received a copy of their interview transcript following the interview giving them an opportunity to verify their information.

Peer review included the aid of a fellow clinical forensic psychology doctoral student, educated in qualitative research, who was currently attending Walden University. This peer is the adult child of a police officer but has never served as a police officer or in the military. This peer has never been married or had any children. Requesting the assistance of a peer can provide several benefits to the qualitative research process (Miles et al., 2019). The peer can ensure alignment between the transcripts and developed themes, explore any researcher bias, and allow for theoretical challenge to the researcher's perspective (Miles et al., 2019). Copies of the original transcripts and interpretations were provided to the peer following data collection. Additionally, a third candidate for peer review was used to mitigate bias and increase internal consistency (Belotto, 2018). A provisionally licensed clinical psychologist that had no police or military background, has never been married, and never had any children, also ensured alignment between transcripts, and developed themes, allowed for the exploration of any researcher bias, and allowed for theoretical challenge to the researcher's perspective (Belotto, 2018). This researcher chose a continuum of peer evaluators, including the researcher, to best suit the data analysis in this study and aided intercoder reliability. Both reviewers signed a statement of confidentiality (see Appendix B).

This researcher's primary goal was to obtain rich, meaningful information to base future interpretations. A secondary goal of this researcher was to fully describe the participant's experience of this phenomenon for other readers to transfer the analysis of

data and resulting information to other settings that might share common characteristics of this phenomenon. This researcher further ensured consistent and thorough record-keeping of verbatim transcripts, peer review notes, documented behavioral observations, and direct quotations to preserve data and confirm the results of the research.

Finally, this researcher transparently explored existing biases related to this study. This researcher desired to ensure the future validity of the study and clarifying the researcher's expectations eliminated the tainting of data collection and subsequent analysis. This researcher was readily aware of her experiences and acknowledged them accordingly. This researcher is and has been a police officer; however, this researcher disclosed personal perceptions and experiences through the recording of preconceived beliefs related to the research of this phenomenon.

Ethical Procedures

When the researcher began an interview, the Informed Consent and Statement of Confidentiality was reviewed, and the participant was asked to sign the documents. This researcher thoroughly explained to each participant the voluntary nature of the study and that participation could be revoked at any time throughout the study. Further, each participant was informed that their identity would be confidential and that any personal identifiers would be removed from the transcripts. This researcher was not aware of any harm associated with participation in this study. Interview transcripts, audiotapes, and files were securely stored in a locked filing cabinet in this researcher's home. Only this researcher had access to secured transcripts for this study. Prior to data validation,

identifying information was removed from the transcripts and aliases were used for personal names.

Summary

The goal of this phenomenological study was to better understand how LEOs experience parenting style changes with their child or children following an on-duty child death. Study participants included eight LEOs who were actively serving as full-time LEOs. Semistructured interviews were used as this researcher interviewed each participant individually, asking qualitative questions. This design allowed the researcher to fully engage with the participants as being fully enveloped in their experience of the phenomenon. The researcher used the interview questions mentioned in Chapter 1 of this study to guide the interview process. Probing questions were asked to obtain additional information, as needed, and allowed for meaningful data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This researcher provided Informed Consent and Statement of Confidentiality to each participant prior to every interview taking place. All personal identifiers were removed from the record for each participant and replaced with aliases. With peer review including another clinical forensic psychology student familiar with qualitative research design and a provisionally licensed clinical psychologist, verification of findings was obtained. Research design was checked, reviewed, and feedback provided to uncover any potential researcher bias. Positive social change emanating from this study includes a richer understanding of the impact of an on-duty child death on a police officer's parenting style. The aim of this study was to reveal how police departments, chaplains, and mental health professionals can intervene following an on-duty child death

and better prepare LEOs and their families prior to an on-duty child death. The procedures were approved by Walden University's institutional review board. Chapter 4 reviewed data collection and summarized interview data including emerging themes.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how LEOs perceive changes in their parenting experiences following an on-duty child death. This potentially traumatic event, an on-duty child death, and the following parenting responses represented how research in this area is dim-sighted. Other researchers have examined occupational stressors and potentially traumatic events (Carleton et al., 2019). This researcher addressed the gap in the literature by focusing on the specific event of an on-duty child death and the LEO's perception of their parenting experience changes following the death. The use of a phenomenological approach allowed this researcher to meaningfully provide descriptions and clarifications of the participant's lived experiences. The implications for positive social change included a better understanding of an officer's experience of occupational stressors, specifically an on-duty child death, and how they respond within their parenting relationship with their child or children. The following RQs were used in this phenomenological study:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of LEOs who have experienced a child death on duty?

RQ2: Did LEOs experience a perceived change in their parenting as a result of an on-duty child death response?

RQ3: For LEOs who had experienced an on-duty child death, what parenting strategies did they adapt from that exposure?

This chapter provided the findings of the interviews of LEOs who have experienced an on-duty child death and have a child or children. It also presented the results of the analyses for the research questions above. This analysis of those interviews exposed the experiences of the participants who share the same phenomenon, while also portraying the commonality of these individual's own lived experience of an on-duty child death explored by this research. These findings were pivotal for providing a foundation from which implications can be drawn.

Setting

Interviews took place via videoconferencing and was mutually agreed upon and comfortable to the interviewee. The platform used to conduct interviews was Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Via email, I provided potential participants with an invitation letter (Appendix A) and the informed consent form. Before beginning each interview, this researcher graciously thanked each participant for their participation in this research and the overall contribution to the literature regarding the nature of parenting experience changes in response to an on-duty potentially traumatic event, specifically an on-duty child death in law enforcement. A general overview of the research topic and the objectives of the interview were then provided to each participant. Prior to the start of the interview, this researcher ensured the participant of the privacy of the location of the researcher and inquired about the participant's location regarding privacy. Each

participant confirmed they were in a private, confidential area they felt they could freely participate without a breach in privacy or confidentiality.

A signed informed consent form was then obtained, and the researcher reviewed the use of audio recording. The participant was reminded of their option to refuse audio recording as outlined in the Informed Consent. Informed Consent was also reviewed with each participant to ensure they selected an option of whether to agree or disagree with the use of an audio recording device. The participants were reminded they would be provided an emailed copy of the transcription for their review. Each participant was informed they could terminate the interview at any time and for any reason. Prior to the start of the interview questions, each participant fully agreed and consented to participating in the audio-recorded interview.

During each interview, this researcher referred to an outline of all the main questions mentioned in Chapter 1 of this study that would be asked to each participant. These questions were repeated if the participant required clarification. Probing questions were asked throughout each interview to provide further clarification, a deeper understanding, or additional insight into how each participant experienced parenting changes with their child or children after experiencing an on-duty child death. These procedures provided for a foundation of rich information that this researcher would be

able to later understand how these experiences were shared by the participants and the suggestions that followed.

Demographics

The originally proposed sample of eight to 15 participants was met. As a result, eight individuals met the research criteria and were selected to participate in this study. This group was comprised of seven men and one woman. At the time of the interviews, all participants verified they met the inclusion criteria for the study as follows: full-time police officer, having experienced an on-duty child death, and having an adopted, or biological child or children. One participant indicated they did not have adopted or biological children but did have a stepchild. This researcher considered excluding this participant based on this criterion, however the researcher confirmed the similar familial relationship of an adopted child and stepchild and moved forward with the interview. The group of participants ranged in age from 21 through 55, if disclosed, and had completed varying degrees of tenure in their career. Their time on the job as a patrol officer ranged from five through 32 years. Some participants were currently working as a patrolman or patrolwoman and others had moved into other job sectors of the law enforcement career including investigations, administration, and specialized task forces. Two participants were members of a specialized law enforcement agency, where their function was to

respond to specific calls related to the specificity of their law enforcement duties and responsibilities (i.e., narcotics agency and fish and wildlife agency).

Participant 1

Participant 1 (P1) was a 29-year-old, white woman. At the time of this writing, she was in her 4th year of police service. She became a police officer when exploring career options and feeling unfulfilled while working "odd jobs." Participant 1 also mentioned that she also went into this field to "help people". She mentioned her role during service calls, like domestic disputes, as being more noteworthy to her in policing as opposed to "arresting people". She completed a graduate education and mentioned the importance of education in her life. She is currently married. She and her husband have one child, her stepdaughter. She and her husband were recently married, and her stepdaughter was a toddler when "she came into their lives." She described a specific on-duty child death she worked within the first 3 years of policing and that being the only child death she has worked as a police officer to date. Participant 1 disclosed that she feels experiencing the child death made her "more aware" and "protective" of her stepdaughter and her family members, including her husband and stepdaughter, notice the emotional changes she experiences as a result of on-duty potentially traumatic events.

Participant 2

Participant 2 (P2) was a white man, who did not disclose his age. At the time of the interview, Participant 2 was in his 5th year of police service. He stated that his initial reason for entering the field was because he wanted a job "with purpose." He also mentioned he was working in another career field prior to becoming an officer. As a

teenager, he recounted an incident where he and his friends saw a vehicle accident and he "ran toward it" when "everyone else was running away." Participant 2 elaborated he reflected on this situation when he decided to become a police officer as something within him that "drove him toward things" that others might not do. Additionally, he "saw the turmoil in policing in the media in 2016" and wanted "bridge the gap" between the community and police officers. He currently works for a municipal police agency and serves as an investigator. He worked as a patrolman for approximately 2 years prior to becoming an investigator. He is married, currently residing with his wife and three children. His spouse is not an LEO. He mentioned having two girls and one boy. Participant 2 claimed his wife was "surprised" when he informed her, he wanted to become a police officer. He has worked multiple on-duty child deaths and described becoming more "aware and worried" about his children after working the on-duty child deaths. Additionally, he described being "thankful and grateful" that his newborn would cry in the middle of the night because "that meant he was breathing" and working the child deaths "changed his parenting perspective."

Participant 3

Participant 3 (P3) was a 51-year-old white man. At the time of his interview, Participant 3 was in his 33rd year of being in the policing profession. His primary motive for becoming a police officer at the age of 19, was "to catch bad guys, be stealth, get drugs off the streets, and prevent crime." Policing is the only career he has been in and he mentioned hi father and grandfather working in law enforcement, specifically mentioning his father was a DARE officer and his grandfather was a sheriff. Participant 3 noted that

his perspective of policing had changed over the course of his career, saying "I take a different approach to policing now" as he "coaches and teaches outside of the uniform" because he "believes in being part of the community." He has worked for small police agencies, including a small municipality, and larger entities like the Sheriff's Office. He currently is working in law enforcement administration as a police chief. Participant 3 described education as being "important" to him, obtaining "two degrees" since high school completion. He is divorced but currently engaged. He has three biological children, a set of twin boys and one daughter and three stepchildren. He does not have any children with his current fiancé. He elaborated he was a "police officer before he was a parent". When asked about his experience of on-duty child deaths, he mentioned experiencing "several" and they were primarily "vehicle accidents". Participant 3 described being "over aware" but not "overprotective" with his children.

Participant 4

Participant 4 (P4) was a white man, who did not disclose his age. At the time he was interviewed, he was working in his 20th year of law enforcement. Participant 4 stated that he became a police officer because it was "all he ever remembers wanting to do growing up". He elaborated he "never wanted to be anything else". After discharging from the military, and was "old enough", he became a police officer. He went on to establish he had worked in different areas of law enforcement with different police agencies but had never worked in "upper law enforcement administration". He did mention he was a patrol supervisor at one time, a member of the SWAT team, a narcotics agent, and a member of the dive team. At the time of the interview, he was a father of

three, young adult and adolescent children. Participant 4 was currently married and said they married before he became a police officer. His wife was not an LEO but worked in the health care professions. The participant was straightforward in describing several on-duty child deaths he experienced as a patrol officer and while on the dive team. The specifics of these events will be outlined in Chapter 4. Participant 4 disclosed that when confronted with the experience of an on-duty child death and parenting in the days, weeks, months, and years following, he feels the biggest changes were becoming "overprotective", "worrying too much about things out of [his] control", and "being open" with his children about certain situations that could happen in life.

Participant 5

Participant 5 (P5) was a 46-year-old white man. At the time of the interview, P5 had served more than 21 years in law enforcement as a specialized state police officer in parks and wildlife. He was drawn to this type of law enforcement "on a whim" and mentioned he talked about going into wildlife sciences with his father, who encouraged this specific career goal. He was currently unmarried and had been through two divorces. P5 discussed he had three children. He mentioned he felt he prioritized his career over his marriage and his kids. P5 reflected feeling he could relate to other children more than his own and experienced feeling regret about this aspect of his career and parenting. He experienced multiple child deaths while on-duty and mostly elaborated on one particular child death that impacted him.

Participant 6

Participant 6 (P6) was a white man who did not disclose his age. He had spent more than 10 years in law enforcement at the time of the interview. He elaborated he was a specialized type of police officer, working as a state police officer within wildlife sciences. P6 described being married and just celebrating his 11th anniversary with his wife. He had two children at the time of the interview. He mentioned working two child deaths while on-duty and feeling a "special purpose" and "calling" when working "those types of calls". He recalled the specific impacts of the experience of one child death while on-duty and described "never being bothered by death before" except for the "child death calls". P6 emphasized the importance of his undergraduate education and being connected to the school he attended, drawing a relationship between feeling the same "brotherhood and sisterhood" in college and in the type of law enforcement he was involved in.

Participant 7

Participant 7 (P7) was a 45-year-old white man. At the time of the interview, P7 had served more than 20.5 years in law enforcement, beginning his law enforcement career in corrections as a jailer and jail supervisor. He retired from "traditional policing" and was serving as a captain of a school district police department with more than 24,000 children in the school district. He mentioned being married to his "high school sweetheart" and they had three children together. He defined his family as the "highlight" of his life. P7 served in multiple capacities across differing policing agencies throughout his career and experienced multiple child deaths while on duty. He emphasized being a

grandfather at the time of the interview and one specific child death that impacted his relationship with his grandchild and emphasized he felt there were “differences” between the effect of child deaths while he had children at home and as a grandparent.

Participant 8

Participant 8 (P8) was a 45-year-old white man having served more than 15 years in law enforcement at the time of the interview. He worked for two municipal agencies during his career and served in differing capacities while a police officer. He described initially wanting to be a commercial pilot but deciding to go into law enforcement after his “wife became a police officer”. P8 wanted to “do something that made a difference”. He was married at the time of the interview and had only one marriage. He described having three children. P8 recalled two instances of experiencing on-duty child deaths and one particularly “hitting him like a ton of bricks”. He elaborated on the impact of this child death on the relationships with his children and the dynamics of experiencing an on-duty child death while having a spouse in law enforcement.

Data Collection

Using the methods discussed in Chapter 3, I began data collection by identifying potential research participants using my professional network (i.e., LEAPS and Department of Defense Peer Support Network). Appendix C contains the authorization letter signed by the director of LEAPS granting me permission to conduct research with the organization. Potential participants were contacted via email by the executive director of LEAPS, who forwarded the invitation letter, which described the nature of the study, and the informed consent form. Email contact with those interested later ensured each

participant met the required criteria. The number of participants totaled eight. Through email interaction with the participant, this researcher established an appropriate time for an interview using the Teams and Zoom videoconferencing platforms. At the onset of each interview, this researcher reviewed the informed consent form with the participant. During this time, this researcher emphasized the section within the aforementioned form in which the participant agreed to the audio recording of the interview. Upon receipt of the signed consent form, the interview commenced.

The interview protocol developed for this study met all of its objectives. As a result, there were no changes needed to the questions that had been originally developed. The nature of this studied allowed for follow-up questions tailored to each participant's responses while the interview was taking place. This allowed the researcher to gather as much precise information about the nature of parenting experience changes following an on-duty child death as possible. Extensive field notes were taken as a means of recording nonverbal signals presented by the participants during the interview. The average interview lasted approximately one hr. Upon completion of the interview, this researcher reviewed these field notes with the participant. This researcher then proceeded to discuss the participant's reaction to the interview ensuring that the process had not caused discomfort. Recordings were transcribed via Teams or Zoom as well as secondary transcription by the researcher's field notes and audio recording comparisons. The transcripts were sent to the participants for validation and checking before proceeding on to data analysis. During the analysis of data collected, a graduate student who had completed a qualitative research methods course at Walden University, located in

Minnesota, and a provisionally licensed clinical psychologist assisted in validating themes obtained through examination of the transcripts. Before proceeding on to this step, the graduate student and psychologist signed a Confidentiality Agreement form acknowledging that data analyzed must remain confidential. Any identifying information about the participants were removed before validation.

Data Analysis

The researcher focused on understanding and establishing the overarching meaning of the information received during the interview process after data collection and organization phases of the study. These steps were imperative to the goal of understanding the phenomenon being studied. This researcher's experiences related to the areas being studied and explored are communicated directly to the reader. The primary responsibility of this researcher is to highlight any personal experiences of beliefs related to the phenomenon that might have influenced data analysis and interpretation. This is an important process throughout data collection and analysis as it reveals potential prejudices or assumptions that a researcher might possess regarding what they are studying. The position of the researcher must remain neutral, and this process provides the opportunity to counter potential obstacles and biases. Each transcript was reviewed by this researcher in its entirety for the researcher to glean a sense of the meaning each participant conveyed.

The next step of data analysis involved developing an inventory deriving ideas, terms, and significant statements that were communicated by the participant during the interview. This inventory described the 'how' behind the participant's experience of the

phenomenon. The participant's ideas, statements, and terms guided the researcher toward meaningful understanding of the perception and experience of parenting style changes in police officers following an on-duty child death. Statements, terms, and ideas that were especially noteworthy were transferred to a Microsoft Word document for additional analysis. The statements, terms, and ideas were grouped into themes or meaningful units upon completing the inventory. Information was categorized based on the overall meaning of the statements provided. An integral part of this portion of data analysis was providing the researcher with the opportunity to discard themes and meaning units that had no influence on the participants experience of the phenomenon.

The final step of data analysis included categorizing the items listed in the inventory. The researcher designated the themes and meaning units according to the verbal and non-verbal behavioral and emotional expressions that were expressed by the participants. The researcher then used these components to develop more thorough descriptions to provide for the participant's experience as an individual and part of a group. Examples of these multiple experiences and descriptions aided in the accomplishment of this step. This researcher reviewed psychological expressions and then formed individual descriptions. Key patterns were then clustered into a collective description of a group of officers who experienced parenting style changes following the experience of an on-duty child death. The collective shared experience was highlighted through this step.

The primary goal of a phenomenological study reveals the underlying meaning of the lived and shared experiences of the individuals who have experienced the explored

phenomenon. This study included police officers who had a child or children and experienced an on-duty child death and then experienced parenting style changes following this event, ensuring the appropriateness of phenomenological inquiry. The profound insight and understanding of the experience of an on-duty child death by police officers and parenting style changes was provided by this data analysis method. Clusters of content was gathered through the diverse base of information procured through the interview process. Appropriate measures were taken to eliminate repetitive or irrelevant data. This ensured more efficient and meaningful information in theme construction. This researcher gained a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied through examining the experiences of the participants. The primary objective of this study was to understand the experiences of an on-duty child death and perceptions of parenting style changes following this experience. Thus, the data analysis technique described above was the most efficient and systematic method to analyze the collected data.

Bracketing in qualitative research refers to the process of temporarily setting aside one's preconceptions, biases, and assumptions in order to approach the study with an open and unbiased perspective. It is particularly relevant in phenomenological research, where researchers aim to understand the lived experiences of individuals. The purpose of bracketing is to minimize the influence of the researcher's preexisting beliefs on the interpretation of data and to enhance the validity and objectivity of the study. By acknowledging and temporarily suspending personal biases, researchers can better engage with participants' experiences and gain deeper insights into the phenomena under

investigation. This approach helped ensure that the findings are more reflective of the participants' perspectives and not overly shaped by the researchers' preconceived notions.

With 17 years of experience in the human services field, including 7 years as an active-duty police officer and 14 years as a therapist, mental health consultant, and trainer for LEOs, the researcher has developed extensive interactions with law enforcement personnel. Close friendships with police officers, including her husband, have provided valuable insights into the occupational stressors within policing and served as the foundation for the research questions in this study. Maintaining objectivity, the researcher detached herself during interviews through detachment and compartmentalization. This bracketing process involved setting aside personal beliefs, attitudes, and experiences related to law enforcement and on-duty child deaths, enabling a fresh examination of the phenomenon with the participants' experiences at the forefront. Throughout data analysis, the researcher refrained from associating or comparing her own experiences with those shared by participants, ensuring an unbiased approach. After completing the bracketing step, the researcher proceeded to verticalize the data.

Verticalization

Verticalization in qualitative research refers to a methodological approach where researchers delve deeply into the analysis of individual cases before making comparisons or generalizations across cases. Instead of initially seeking commonalities across participants or cases, the focus is on exploring the intricacies and nuances within each case. This process allows researchers to gain a thorough understanding of each participant's unique experiences, perspectives, and context. Key characteristics of

verticalization include in-depth exploration of each participant allowing for constant comparison and analysis. Emphasis was placed on thick description of each participant's interview to capture the complexity and depth of each participant's experience. Themes and patterns were allowed to emerge from each case rather than beginning with an imposed, predefined set of categories. This allowed for a more inductive approach to the participant's experiences prior to engaging in horizontalization.

Horizontalization

Horizontalization of qualitative data refers to a process in qualitative data analysis where this researcher organized and categorized data across participants or cases, aiming to identify common patterns, themes, or trends. This approach allowed the researcher to explore similarities and differences in the data horizontally, after focusing on individual cases in isolation. The goal was to uncover overarching themes or patterns that cut across the entire data set. The transcript from each interview was meticulously studied by this researcher with each statement being inferred as a unique experience offered by the participant. During her review of the transcripts, this researcher highlighted and notated significant statements, thoughts, and emotions that were relevant to each participant's experience. All irrelevant or repetitive data was removed as this researcher proceeded on to copy significant statements into a Word document. Categories were then assigned based on the overall meaning of these statements.

In the process of data analysis, the researcher organized the mentioned statements into core categories, culminating in the identification and development of themes. Fifteen categories emerged, coalescing into seven overarching themes. This amalgamation

involved grouping categories that exhibited repetition or demonstrated thematic similarities. The six resultant themes encapsulate the essence and composite description of the overall participant experience. A comprehensive listing of the final categories and themes is provided in Appendix D. The rest of this chapter provides information on both the conclusive themes and their corresponding participants. The supporting evidence for the latter will be presented later in this chapter through direct quotations from each person involved.

Codes and Themes by Participant

Utilizing the themes established in the prior horizontalization process, textual narratives detailing each participant's experience were crafted. These descriptions aim to offer contextual understanding of participants' encounters. Integrated with the structural description explained later in this section, the textual representation serves as a tool for synthesizing meanings, contributing to an overarching essence of the phenomenon or experiences under scrutiny. The formulation of textual descriptions drew upon direct quotations transcribed from the interviews, enriching the narrative with participants' own voices.

Structural Description

After examining the textual descriptions, the researcher formulated a structural description to delineate the specific way the experience or phenomenon unfolded. This structural description aims to elucidate the process through which the participants' experiences, as outlined in the textual descriptions, took shape. Complemented by the textual description, the structural aspect furnishes a robust basis for constructing the

composite description, or essence, of the study. This approach enhances the study's comprehensiveness by offering valuable insights into the studied phenomenon, thereby delivering a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences for subsequent analysis.

Composite Description

In conclusion, both textual and structural descriptions were employed to craft a composite description, capturing the essence of the experience. This composite description not only conveys what the participants underwent but also delves into how these experiences unfolded. Through a thorough examination of this composite depiction, the researcher achieved a deeper comprehension of the participants and their encounters. The confirmation of data saturation becomes evident, as each theme finds support in the participants' responses. The shared experiences among participants were distilled by identifying commonalities in their accounts of exposure to police stress. This composite description accentuates the challenges faced during an officer's inaugural year in policing and the strategies employed to navigate such pressures. Furthermore, the essence furnishes responses to the research questions outlined in the introductory section of this chapter. The detailed composite description is presented to the reader later in Chapter 5.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative methods focus on exploring aspects that defy easy quantification. Consequently, qualitative researchers place significant emphasis on ensuring the trustworthiness of the data rather than allowing the data to stand on its own, as is often the case in quantitative studies. Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research requires diligent efforts. The forthcoming sections

delve into four crucial elements for establishing trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This researcher addresses these components by detailing their approach to providing evidence of trustworthiness.

Credibility

The initiation of this process involves prioritizing credibility, recognized as a pivotal element in establishing trustworthiness. Credibility serves as an indication of how we ensure rigor in the research process and how we communicate to others that we have done so. It encompasses validating the soundness of the work conducted throughout the project. Researchers often bolster credibility by allowing participants to review transcripts from their interviews, enabling them to verify the information shared and the researcher's interpretation of the data. In this study, participants were emailed transcripts for verification before the researcher proceeded with data analysis.

Furthermore, credibility was fortified through a peer review process. Prior to commencing the study, the researcher sought the assistance of two colleagues, a fellow graduate student at Walden University with expertise in qualitative research design. The second peer review member was a clinical psychologist with expertise in mixed-methods research. After signing a confidentiality statement (refer to Appendix B), the peers received copies of the original transcripts and the researcher's interpretations. Following a thorough review, the peers concurred that the interpretations were robust, providing an additional layer of assurance regarding the credibility of the study and its findings.

Transferability

Transferability, another essential aspect of ensuring trustworthiness, primarily relies on the engagement of the research reader. In the context of phenomenological research, this entails the reader attentively noting the specific details of participants' experiences and drawing comparisons to situations or environments with which they are more acquainted. For the reader to effectively undertake this task, the researcher must furnish a comprehensive description of these experiences. The provision of such detailed depictions enhances the transferability of the study's results, facilitating the reader's ability to apply the information to diverse settings and emphasizing it as a shared phenomenon. Thorough descriptions may transport the reader to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences. To ensure this level of detail, the researcher relied on direct quotations, using them to illustrate participants' experiences and enabling the formulation of interpretations that convey the same level of specificity.

Dependability

Trustworthiness is further safeguarded by establishing the research as dependable, a determination rooted in comprehensive accounts of the project's execution. An external auditor scrutinizes each component of the project to ensure the overall quality of the research. To guarantee the dependability of this research, a research reviewer, unfamiliar with the researcher and the project, was appointed through Walden University in the role of an external auditor. The researcher furnished this independent assessor with meticulous documentation outlining every step in the project, encompassing data collection, data analysis, and theme development.

Confirmability

The final element in establishing trustworthiness, confirmability, aims to validate that the findings are exclusively derived from participants' communicated experiences, unaffected by the researcher's assumptions, biases, personal experiences, or imagination. The researcher's meticulous scrutiny of transcripts and reliance on detailed quotations from participants, focusing on their expressions rather than the researcher's interpretations, ensured the confirmability of the study. External reviewers' assistance also proves pivotal in affirming confirmability, especially when the researcher provides a thorough audit trail. Thus, this researcher supplied the external reviewer with comprehensive documentation, offering a detailed portrayal of every facet of the study. Confirmability was upheld through meticulous record-keeping throughout the project, delineating the rationale behind the study's results presented in Chapter 5 and elucidating the process leading to that outcome.

Results

In this phenomenological inquiry, I concentrated on eliciting information pertaining to participants' encounters with an on-duty child death and the resulting changes in parenting experiences through a semistructured interview protocol. During these interviews, the goal was to elucidate and articulate the meanings embedded in these experiences. To enhance the understanding of participants' experiences, the researcher employed bracketing, verticalization, horizontalization, member checking, and peer review, ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of the received data. As the process of data analysis unfolded, thematic patterns emerged from the gathered data, aligning

with the earlier research questions outlined in this chapter. The six identified themes encompassed external stressors, mental health stigmatization, and emotion-focused coping. Subsequent sections provide corroborative evidence, substantiating these themes with verbatim quotes extracted from the interviews with participants.

Theme 1: Vigilance and Heightened Sensitivity to Child Safety

Occupational stressors are stressors that come in the form of events and situations that are inherent in a job that occur to an individual causing them to feel pressured and/or strained. Participants reported these demands as situations, events, rules/regulations that happen to a police officer and are often viewed as factors that are out of their control. The experience of an on-duty child death or multiple on-duty child deaths was described by the participants as an event that they felt pressure or strain and felt out of control. All eight participants expressed discomfort at one time or another due to the influence of the on-duty child death or multiple on-duty child deaths. These individuals reported specific instances of vigilance and heightened sensitivity to child safety.

Police officers can be called into situations that are often unpredictable, chaotic, and they are required to take command of the situation and perform. Many of these calls for service may have the potential for tragic outcomes and this is at the forefront of an officer's mind when summoned to these types of calls for service. Many participants outlined specific instances where they were dispatched to an on-duty child death and experienced chaos, unpredictability, and projection of their parenting experiences actively in the call or following the call with their own child or children. Table 1 includes excerpts from participant responses that identify specific calls to on-duty child death or

deaths, unique to each reporting them, demonstrating the influence on their parenting and their status as a parent at the time of the on-duty child death(s).

Table 1

Participant Responses That Support Theme 1

Theme	Interview excerpt
Vigilance and heightened sensitivity to child safety (Theme 1)	"I don't trust people a lot to be around her, especially at this age, because she'll just go along with what anybody says. I don't leave her unsupervised or go to neighbor's houses even if we know them unless one of [us] is there with her. I am far more cautious and aware of who she is around since I became a police officer." (Participant 1) "You worry about them sleeping and just not waking up and that was heavy on my mind. I was worried because my wife was breastfeeding so I told her to wake me up so I could be awake if she fell asleep with the baby while she was breastfeeding. I was very strict on not falling asleep with the baby." (Participant 2) "I held my kids tighter because I did not know if that would be the last time. I tried to cherish the moments." (Participant 2) "When I heard my newborn start to cry, I wanted to get mad because when you have a newborn you are exhausted and want to go to sleep but it made me think, ok, if they are crying, they are alive and so it was a good thing. It gave me more patience and thankfulness. I would pick him up, try to comfort him, and get him back to sleep." (Participant 2) "It made me worry about my kids when they are not under my direct care, even if they go to their grandparent's house. I will state the obvious, like keeping things out of the toddler's reach, because I think if I do not state it, I would regret it severely if something happened to my kids. Some family get offended when I say things this obvious." (Participant 2) "It made me want to limit how many kids my wife and I had. I did not want to have any more children because of the fear of losing a child and how easy it is, especially in the first few months, for a baby to seemingly stop breathing." (Participant 2) "It makes me stricter and more overprotective in ways. I get onto my oldest children for leaving things out that my toddler can put in his mouth." (Participant 2) "I will not let my kids go to any other house in the neighborhood unless I have personally been in the house and know the parents personally or we are at the house with them." (Participant 2) "I don't recall how things changed in my parenting experience." (Participant 3) "I did have thoughts that my sons would be driving soon and how I could make changes because it wasn't the kid's fault that died. I worry about other people because this kid was hit, and it wasn't his fault. It was holiday time and I thought about holiday traffic being bad." (Participant 3) "I took my kids to the back roads and in grassy areas and taught them to drive. I taught them to watch other people and to take care of their driving." (Participant 3) "They don't have their cell phones when they drive." (Participant 3) "I shared this story with my kids." (Participant 3) "I used these situations as learning situations with my kids and teach them things about making decisions." (Participant 3) "I would take my boys out to the gun range and talk to them about gun safety and suicide. I would tell them once you turn a weapon on yourself, it's done. It's a real bad choice. When my son goes hunting now, I worry about

Theme	Interview excerpt
	everybody else there with him and a hunting accident that could happen." (Participant 3)
	"I always tell them; I worked this last night, and you know this person was careless and their life ended because of it. I don't want to see you guys have to deal with that. A lot of these child deaths happened before my kids were born but I held onto them so I could tell them not to become cops and educate them the best I could. I did not want to be closed off. I did not give them the gory details, but I had conversations with them." (Participant 3)
	"I don't think I was overparenting, but I was definitely aware." (Participant 3:
	"I guess I am just hypervigilant and overprotective because something could happen." (Participant 4)
	"My wife and I were divorcing at the time, and I did not return home immediately to see my children. I feel like I did hug them tighter when I was with them. I tried to get more face-to-face time and let them know how important they were to me because I did not want to take one day for granted." (Participant 5)
	"I do not let my kids go with anyone swimming. I make my kids wear life jackets at the splash pad. I do not let them go swimming in lakes." (Participant 6)
	"I went home that day and loved on my daughter. I do not think that experience by itself changed my parenting experience. I think it caused me to withdraw and stay withdrawn. It was kind of the straw that broke the camel's back." (Participant 7)
	"I think the biggest thing that affected me was that I just had crawled out of bed where I was sleeping with my grandson who was a newborn baby. I had a strong urge to leave that scene, so I did. I went home and scooped up my grandson and loved on him." (Participant 7)
	"I see what is out there and I want to protect my children as much as possible. I think before going into policing, I was oblivious to what was out there." (Participant 8)
	"We did not let anyone who was not our parents watch our children." (Participant 8)

Theme 2: Emotional Intensity of the Situation

The second theme that was revealed was the emotional intensity of the on-duty child death. This presented in the way the participants mentioned who was on scene and how those on scene were responding (see Table 2).

Table 2

Participant Responses That Support Theme 2

Theme	Interview response
Emotional intensity of the situation (Theme 2)	"I was the first one on scene to an unresponsive infant and the mother was a really young mom. She was really distraught. I ended up doing CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation], but it was far too late. The mother had another child, a toddler that was still in diapers, and he just sat right next to me while I did CPR. I had to tell the mother to remove him from the scene because I felt like it was traumatizing him." (Participant 1) "The body was horrible and doing CPR on a tiny human being is different. I do not know how gruesome I am supposed to get but the thing that I think about most is the horrible sound whenever I would do CPR compressions." (Participant 1) "Me and my coworker arrived first on scene to an unresponsive infant. We met the mother and grandmother out in the driveway. We began doing CPR on her on the hood of a car until the fire department arrived. The mother and grandmother were present while we were doing CPR and they were pretty hysterical. They were very emotional, screaming at times and pacing back and forth." (Participant 2) "There were other officers and medical personnel on scene before I got there. We recovered the boy's body out of the water and put him on the floor of my boat. The family was brought out and they just stood there watching as we meticulously went back and forth across the water to try and find the baby. We searched more than 36 hr to try and find this baby. I positioned my boat so the family could not see him." (Participant 5) "Criminal Investigations Division were there documenting everything. My partner had arrived before I did and he was very torn up. He was the one that found him floating in the water. No one would get the child out of the water. I remember a sense of urgency and going to get him out of the water because no one else would. I scooped him up and took him to the bank." (Participant 6) "The mother was hysterical, but I could not even look at her I was so angry." (Participant 6) "The truck was completely smashed. I was trying to supervise the scene. There was wreckage, the girl and boy covered with sheets, and troopers everywhere. The mother was driving in front of the father and had witnessed her whole family die. I could hear her hollering and screaming." (Participant 7) "The parents fell asleep after they had been out drinking and woke up the next morning and their baby was dead. The mom and dad looked like they had a rough night, still wiping sleep out of their eyes. The mother lit a cigarette and started crying. I think it hit her all of a sudden. The dad was pacing around because he was the county commissioner's son. I think he was thinking I just killed my kid." (Participant 7) "A 2-year-old girl was not responding, so we got called out. The mother left the child with her boyfriend and came home, and the girl was not breathing. The boyfriend was aloof, and the mother was, of course, sobbing. She did not know what happened and just wanted to know what happened. I performed CPR on the girl." (Participant 8)

Theme 3: Cumulative Effect of Multiple Experiences

Table 3 shows the participant responses associated with Theme 3.

Table 3

Participant Responses That Support Theme 3

Theme	Interview excerpt
Cumulative effect of multiple experiences (Theme 3)	"With one of the cases, I believe there was some negligence and it kind of hardens me and makes me angry against certain types of people. This goes back to how I feel about my kids going over to other people's houses. In one of the other on-duty child deaths, I saw the uncleanliness of the house, them smoking and using marijuana, and I do not want my children to go to a house like that." (Participant 1)
	"Two of the deaths were unresponsive infants and one of the deaths was a toddler that choked on a board game piece. My children were around the same ages of the unresponsive infants and the toddler that choked. In the days, weeks, and months following all of these deaths, I worried about them waking up or my wife falling asleep with them. As they got older, I have become stricter with my kids and overprotective in ways, like going over to people's houses, big responses to little things, and worry about little things." (Participant 2)
	"I have worked several child deaths and every child death was a juvenile death and a fatality accident that I worked by myself." (Participant 3)
	"These kinds of things burn themselves into your head. They burn right into you." (Participant 3)
	"I was trying to think about what has impacted me as far as child deaths, and I don't think it is just things that have happened to children. Things in general have impacted me just doing the job I have done for so long and seeing the things I have seen. It just made me that way. I have seen about five child deaths in my career." (Participant 4)
	"Another child death I was the first on scene. I was thinking that I was the first on scene to all of the child death calls. I responded to an unresponsive teen who had overdosed. Someone in his family found him in his room." (Participant 4)
	"I had two on-duty child deaths, and one impacted me more. Both were drownings. We found a 2-year-old boy in a creek behind his house. His mother was a drug user and passed out with the needle in her arm and he wandered outside quite far from his house." (Participant 6)
	"I worked multiple child deaths but two stick out to me. A father decided to kill his whole family by running his vehicle into oncoming traffic. That was probably the worst one. I heard them say there were kids, but I did not see any. I did not even realize I was standing next to the 4-year-old little girl half hanging out from under a sheet. When I looked down, it was terrible." (Participant 7)
	"Now that I am working outside of traditional policing and am in a school, I am in a place that is much more positive. My family tells me I am a whole different dad and husband from when they were raised. Traditional policing made me a much harder, colder, unemotional person." (Participant 7)

Theme 4: Adjustments in Parenting Style Over Time

Table 4 shows participant responses associated with Theme 4.

Table 4

Participant Responses That Support Theme 4

Theme	Interview excerpt
Adjustments in parenting style over time (Theme 4)	"I think my daughter can tell when I am in "couch mode" because I do not do as many things with her. Her dad is a cop and we both struggle with depression, and I think she has learned to make herself smaller when the mood swings come. She is very high energy and an only child, so she wants all of our attention all of the time and it really hurts her feelings when I say me or daddy is not feeling up to that right now." (Participant 1) "I have become hardened in some ways and strict in a lot of other ways." (Participant 2) "I think I have become more caring for my children and putting their needs over my needs. Paying attention to things like how they are supposed to be sleeping. I do not believe in cosleeping. I keep them near so I can hear them. I do not keep stuff in their cribs. I am attentive to their body, looking at their body, listening to their breathing. Small things like that." (Participant 2) "Still to this day, I am constantly moving stuff away on the counter that I think my toddler can reach and getting onto the older ones for leaving little things out. We have a small toy box that the older kids are only allowed to get out when the toddler is sleeping because there are too many small toys he could choke on." (Participant 2) "In the past my older kids have fed my toddler, but I do not allow that anymore. They do not understand but I tell them they can only feed him when I am there or tell them they can. My wife has given him a cheerio and I did not know it and I see him chewing on something, so I run to get it out of his mouth and realize it is just a cheerio." (Participant 2) "I use the stuff that has happened in my career as educational tools with my children." (Participant 3) "My oldest son calls me a pop tart. Crusty and hard on the outside and soft an mushy on the inside. The biggest way parenting has changed since I have been a police officer is I have probably become too overprotective. My wife has said it to me." (Participant 4) "I try to be open with my kids about issues I've had; like real conversations. I tell them it isn't that I don't trust you, and it's not you issue. It's a me issue that I have to figure out because I have seen things. I guess I worry too much about what could happen." (Participant 4) "I have worked drugs the majority of my career. I taught about drugs in the schools and youth groups. My oldest son has sat through that class three times. My middle one sat through it twice and my youngest is about to sit through it." (Participant 4) "Even though my kids are older, I still go into their room at night when I get home and check on them to make sure they are still breathing." Participant 4 "I teach teenagers about drugs now and when I talk to these kids and my kids, I do not show many pictures because I do not want anyone to freak out but I try to paint a mental picture for them. I want them to understand how real it

is. I tell them it is a violent and lonely death. You will urinate and defecate yourself. You will throw up and drown in your own vomit. You will turn colors and when your family finds you, that is the last image they will have of you." (Participant 4)

"My kids were really little for a teenage death I worked so I don't really think it changed my parenting a whole lot as some of the others did." (Participant 4)

"When my kids got old enough to swim, we hired a private swim instructor to teach them. They all had to wear floaties all the time and they could not swim alone at any time. That one really bothered me, and I probably became more overprotective and worried more. But, I don't think it was too bad." (Participant 4)

"When my kids were learning to drive, I put them through a lot of teaching tests. More than most people would. I do not let my youngest kid walk through a parking lot alone. He has to have somebody tall enough to walk with him so other people can see him. He is 10 years old. He cannot run in parking lots either." (Participant 4)

"I do not give my kids a curfew because one of the teenagers was rushing home to beat her curfew. I use Life 360 to make sure my son does not speed because in the other death, the kid was racing when he had the accident. I have the hardest time with realizing a lot of things are out of your control and you just have to let them go. I do not know if all parents are that extreme, but that is just how I am." (Participant 4)

"I had a 14-month-old at home at the time of the child drowning. I had always heard working child deaths would affect you if you had kids at home. I think it would have bothered me more if my kids were living at home with me at the time." (Participant 5)

"It made me think about spending a lot of time on the water. I am a freak about water with my kids with all of my experience with dead kids in the water. It makes me over the top with water safety with my kids." (Participant 6)

"I am over the top when it comes to water. I make sure the fences and gates are secure on our new place. I make them stay in the truck when we go down there. I don't like them going swimming and do not let them swim in the lakes." (Participant 6)

"I began drinking too much, had a lot of baggage, and bottled it all up. I handled everything terribly. I did not properly connect with my wife or kids for years where they just got used to it and they were ok with it at that point." (Participant 7)

"The way I responded with my grandkids was totally different than how I responded with my kids when they were young. I would go and pick my grandson up from daycare just to make sure he was safe. My kids had to tell me to stop picking him up because they were paying for daycare." (Participant 7)

"My family knows if I meet somebody in public and introduce them they are ok. If I do not introduce the person, they should walk away and act like they do not know me. One time I was at the pharmacy with my son and a guy was getting angry and loud. I had to step in and get rough with the guy and my son ran away as soon as he saw me go toward the guy. I do not think parents who are non-law enforcement teach their kids these kinds of things." (Participant 7)

Theme 5: Career Journey

Table 5 shows participant responses associated with Theme 5.

Table 5

Participant Responses That Support Theme 5

Theme	Interview excerpt
Career journey (Theme 5)	"I needed a career field and I also like getting to the bottom of things. I like to investigate and dig deeper so it seemed like a natural fit. I worked a lot with police officers, and it became a natural progression." (Participant 1) "I was working in sales at an industrial supply type place, and I began listening to a podcast about police. I was seeing all of the hate police were getting in the media. I wanted to bridge the gap and run towards the fight, not away from it. Michael Brown happened in 2016 and there was an emergence of a lot of negativity towards cops and I wanted to provide a positive light." (Participant 2) "I remembered responding to an incident as a teenager where I responded differently than other kids that were there with me. When I was in my early teens, me and my buddies rolled up on a vehicle accident that was pretty bad. We were not sure if the occupants were alive or dead. No one was approaching the vehicle, so I decided to act. I did not freeze up." (Participant 2) "I just did not believe in what I was selling. It was just a job. Now I feel my current job gives me a sense of purpose." (Participant 2) "I was able to talk to a police chief that gave me a favorable opinion and he kind of gave me a shot." (Participant 2) "I had another career path in mind from high school, but my family was in law enforcement (my dad and grandfather) and I rode out with my dad one time and after that I was hooked. I wanted to catch bad guys and take drugs off the street and catch people. This is really the only job I have ever had." (Participant 3) "Ever since I can remember as a child, I wanted to be a police officer. It is all I wanted to do my whole life. My mom said as early as two or three I said this is what I wanted to do. It was all I ever talked about. It was just a burning desire. I didn't choose this profession, it chose me. I'm the only one in my family to be a police officer." (Participant 4) "I became a police officer on a whim. I was in college studying something else but had a friend who was studying environmental science. I saw that curriculum and said I can do that. I am a special type of state police officer that works conserving our environment." (Participant 5) "I did not really want to be a traditional police officer. I wanted to work as a police officer that enforced wildlife laws in addition to policing. I did not ever pursue any other job outside of policing." (Participant 6) "My initial intention was to be a special kind of law enforcement officer that worked in the outdoors. I learned that it was so much more than that. I agreed to lay my life down for people and their property." (Participant 6) "I did not initially grow up wanting to be a cop. I needed a job and found one in the county jail. That kind of got me engrossed in law enforcement. I was that guy that always wanted to achieve more so the next step for me was

	being a street cop. I was 22 years old when I became a corrections officer and 26 when I became a police officer." (Participant 7) "I did not really want to become a police officer. I wanted to be a pilot. I could not afford to finish flight school and my wife had become a police officer. So, I became one too. I thought it would be interesting. We wanted to make a difference and help people." (Participant 8)

Theme 6: Early Officer Career Experience

Table 6 shows participant responses associated with Theme 6.

Table 6

Participant Responses That Support Theme 6

Theme	Interview excerpt
Early officer career experience (Theme 6)	"I am coming up on my fifth anniversary as a police officer. The child death I experienced was within my first 5 years as a police patrol officer. Before becoming an officer, I was in college and working at a school helping to train police officers." (Participant 1) "I joined policing in the beginning of 2019." (Participant 2) "I started off as a part-time officer and began when I was 19 years old. I have been a police officer for over 30 years. I moved around a bit but began working in the jail. I spent some time as a deputy sheriff. I spent time on patrol, then as a supervisor of patrol, and now a police chief." (Participant 3) "I have worked a little bit of everything in policing except for administration. I have been doing this job for over 20 years. I started out on regular patrol and was on a crime suppression unit. Then I became a member of a local drug task force as a canine officer. Then, I became a narcotics investigator. I went back to patrol as a supervisor. I was an investigator for major crimes. I worked on the SWAT team. I worked for the state narcotics agency. I retired and then went back to work for the state narcotics agency. I have done a lot and seen a lot. I couldn't become an officer for several years so initially I joined the military." (Participant 4) "I was a biologist and was a hunting guide in Canada. I love my job and it is the most important thing to me outside of my wife, my kids, and God." (Participant 6) "I left the jail as a supervisor and then went to patrol. I became a patrol supervisor. I spent the majority of my career in law enforcement supervision. Now I am in law enforcement administration as a captain of a school district with 24,000 kids. My son was a deputy for a few years, but I did not want him to be a cop." (Participant 7)

Theme 7: Emotional Impact on Officers (Numbness, Desensitization, and Compartmentalization)

Table 7 shows participant responses associated with Theme 7.

Table 7

Participant Responses That Support Theme 7

Theme	Interview excerpt
Emotional impact on officers (numbness, desensitization, and compartmentalization) (Theme 7)	"I still remember the sound the baby's lungs made when I was doing CPR. I don't think I have ever told anyone that part before because I do not want to traumatize other people." (Participant 1)
	"I worry about the future a lot. I get really fatigued and think it is a symptom of my depression." (Participant 1)
	"I think I was able to compartmentalize because I never had a baby and never had the fear of my child getting SIDS [sudden infant death syndrome]." (Participant 1)
	"Because I was able to compartmentalize, the age of the mother, and that the child that died was much younger than my child helped me separate it in my mind." (Participant 1)
	"I like to think that I am pretty self-aware and think about what I am feeling. I feel like my response to the child death was not as some people's may be. I saw the detective crying at the critical incident debriefing and wondered if there was something wrong with me, if I was too cold, because I felt a lot more detached than that." (Participant 1)
	"Holding that 7-week-old lifeless baby and going back home to hold my 8-week-old son who is alive, you just cannot imagine the pain of picking up your lifeless baby and there being no life in it. You know, just a lifeless little body. I will never forget that and do not think the parents of that baby will ever forget that. I do not want to ever feel that feeling." (Participant 2)
	"In our occupation back then, you did not have briefings or things of that nature. The stigma was always just suck it up. You had to kind of weather it on your own and if you didn't you were weak and couldn't handle the job. It might not have ever been said, but it was felt and there was a lot of that. I have always felt I was impervious to these types of things happening and felt I could handle it. I go to work and come home." (Participant 3)
	"There isn't a year that goes by that I don't think about Thanksgiving Day 5 or 6 years ago. I was on patrol at the sheriff's office and responded to a vehicle that was on fire. It was a 17-year-old, and he was broadsided. Someone on scene pulled him out but when I got there, I started CPR. Sometimes CPR is just for looks. You do it for the family or you do it for people standing around, but you know the person is gone. That is how this kid was. It was very, very hard." (Participant 3)
	"I was the first one on scene for an assist death. I lived close and got there first. I called for EMS [emergency medical services]. When they got

there, we scooped up the baby and started CPR. I think that one bothered me because my wife was pregnant, and you already have so much to worry about before they are even born. Our first kid was born 5 weeks premature, and we spent 10 days in the NICU [neonatal intensive care unit]. It seemed like just another thing to worry about; that your kid could just die in the middle of the night." (Participant 4)

"When you are on scene at something like that, you just have to see it as a body and that is it. You do not want to think on a personal level because that will prevent you from being able to do your job. You do not want it to mess with you mentally. You try to protect yourself and desensitize yourself to it." (Participant 4)

"One drowning I worked, a girl was learning to swim, and her brothers were teaching her. They were in a pond. She went under and did not come back up. I was the first one there and ran into the water. I dove to try and find her and finally found her 15 min or so after I got there. I refused to look at her face when we brought her out of the water because I didn't want to see her face in my dreams for the rest of my life. But I still see what she was wearing." (Participant 4)

"It is weird doing this job. Things that should bother you don't. Things that shouldn't bother you, do." (Participant 4)

"I don't think my parenting has changed in the days or months following these child deaths, but I think it has changed over time. I ask a lot of questions when they go out. I ask about the types of functions they are going to. If I don't feel it's safe enough, I don't let them go. My wife tells me I am being overprotective. But I don't think it's affected me. I have tried to be everywhere and control everything and overprotect even though I know I can't." (Participant 4)

"The last child death I worked a child was run over at a car wash. A teenager ran over a toddler that a mother did not keep an eye on while she was cleaning out her car. I was standing there looking at this toddler's head. The thing that bothered me most was I had no emotion whatsoever. I felt like I was tapped out. I was just blank. I went and talked to the kid as they were laying there and apologized and told him I'm sorry, I do not have anything left for you. You are supposed to feel something after that and I didn't. I was just done. I had nothing left." (Participant 4)

"I realize I don't ever stop to reflect." (Participant 5)

"Maybe I was just able to disconnect from it or maybe I am just heartless. I know I have emotions and I cry. I feel like I get emotional about things, but I can matter of factly say I do not think the child deaths affected me." (Participant 5)

"I don't think seeing the baby really bothered me, but I am not a psychologist looking in. What really bothered me was seeing the family's reactions." (Participant 5)

"I had to work hard as a young officer to keep my work at the door when I came home. When you see things at work, you can kind of reflect back on your situation at home too. I think that was something that was hard to do." (Participant 6)

"It has never bothered me other than the two instances that it involved a child." (Participant 6)

"A father and his son drowned while duck hunting. We found the father on top of the boy trying to lift him out of the water to safety. I never saw the child but the other officers there described him. I could not imagine going

through that. It made me want to go home and hug my kids really tight." (Participant 6)

"The first child death I worked was a drowning. My kid was 2 or so at home. The bank leading up to the creek, you could tell the child walked around on the bank because there were tiny footprints everywhere. There were not any adult footprints in the sand." (Participant 6)

"I was outraged. I was pissed. I was fine through the whole thing but someone from our crisis team called me and after we hung up, I broke down. That is the first time something had ever just hit me. I had worked multiple deaths of adults but nothing ever bothered me like this. I drove home, got in the shower, and broke down." (Participant 6)

"I've never talked in depth about that situation." (Participant 6)

"This job will make you lose faith in the good." (Participant 6)

"You just try to do your best and leave it at the door when you come home." (Participant 6)

"I think I was always good compartmentalizing professional from personal but at that time in my life, my wife and I were having marriage difficulties and we had young children at home." (Participant 7)

"When I deal with things like that, I deal with them internally. I was pretty depressed the days following. I did not talk about it. I withdrew." (Participant 7)

"You just have to deal with it and not bring it home." (Participant 7)

"I was purely and emotionally rocked. I never really thought about it until now." (Participant 7)

"We later found out the boyfriend had given the child methadone to sleep and that is why she died. When I found that out, it was a hard deal and was overwhelming. I just sat there and took a break for a minute. We had to go out on the next call, but it made me scared for my kid and kind of tore me up. I reflect on the situation and the seriousness of the situation. I was not overprotective, I do not think, but I just wanted to be closer to my daughter. I saw my daughter in that little girl." (Participant 8)

"You just have to push those things aside and do not let them overtake your emotions. If you get emotionally attached to every case you go on, you will not last long in this line of work. You have to detach yourself." (Participant 8)

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to develop a more extensive understanding of how officers experience parenting changes following an on-duty child death. The data collected during in-depth semistructured interviews highlighted many patterns of meaning across all participants. Most noteworthy were the contributions of all participants that led to the development of the following themes: vigilance and hypersensitivity to child safety, emotional intensity of the situation, cumulative effect of

multiple experiences, adjustments in parenting style over time, career journey, early officer career experiences, and the emotional impact on officers. The steps performed during this process (bracketing, verticalization, horizontalization, etc.) led to the development of a composite description representing both what and how associated with the overall experience of participants. Chapter 5 provided the reader with an interpretation of this researcher's findings outlined in this chapter. The limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications for social change were discussed.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

In this phenomenological study, this researcher sought to provide a better understanding of how police officers experience parenting changes following an on-duty child death. The study also shed light on a gap in the literature regarding this phenomenon. This researcher utilized a phenomenological research design as a means of exploring the depth of the participants experience and the meanings of their lived experiences. A better understanding of how officers experience parenting changes following an on-duty child death has implications for the development of the most salient prevention and intervention strategies. The last chapter of this study provided the reader with an interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, social change implications, and a conclusion to the study.

Interpretation of the Findings

Officers shared diverse motivations for entering the police force, including a desire to make a positive impact or bridge the gap between law enforcement and the community. Personal experiences, family influences, and a sense of purpose contributed to officers' career choices. Understanding officers' motivations and backgrounds was crucial for comprehending how their profession intersects with personal life. Early career experiences, including exposure to on-duty child deaths, shaped officers' perspectives and coping mechanisms. Officers described challenges in compartmentalizing work and personal life, highlighting the need for effective coping strategies early in their careers.

Early experiences impacted officers differently, influencing their emotional responses and attitudes toward their work.

Police officers experienced occupational stressors related to on-duty child deaths, leading to feelings of pressure and strain. The impact extended beyond work, influencing the officers' parenting styles and attitudes towards child safety. Officers exhibited increased vigilance, caution, and awareness in parenting, reflecting their exposure to tragic events. Officers described the emotional intensity of on-duty child deaths, emphasizing the distressing nature of such incidents. Exposure to distressed family members added an emotional layer to the experience, affecting officers both professionally and personally. The emotional toll underscored the need for support mechanisms and coping strategies for officers dealing with these situations.

Multiple on-duty child deaths contributed to a cumulative effect on officers' emotional well-being and parenting styles. Officers exhibited protective behaviors, influencing their decisions about their children's activities and interactions. Exposure to neglect or unsafe environments during investigations affected officers' trust in others when it considered their own children. Officers adapted their parenting styles over time, becoming more cautious, protective, and sometimes overbearing. Parenting adjustments were influenced by the officers' cumulative experiences and reflections on the unpredictable nature of their profession. The officers' attempts to balance protection and normalcy in parenting reflected the ongoing impact of their work on family life.

Officers exhibited varying emotional responses to on-duty child deaths, including numbness, desensitization, and compartmentalization. Compartmentalization is identified

as a coping mechanism, allowing officers to fulfill their professional duties without overwhelming personal emotions. Emotional impact varied among officers, emphasizing the importance of mental health support and coping resources within the law enforcement profession.

The study underscored the intricate interplay between occupational experiences and personal life, particularly in the context of on-duty child deaths. Comprehensive support systems, both within law enforcement agencies and externally, are crucial for officers dealing with the emotional challenges arising from their work. Recognizing the long-term effects on parenting and well-being can inform policies, training, and interventions to promote the mental health of police officers and their families.

Limitations of the Study

This phenomenological study made a significant contribution to the current literature concerning the firsthand experiences of officers in the context of occupational stress, offering a nuanced exploration of a relatively understudied domain within the law enforcement community. It delved into the shifts in the interactions between LEOs and their families, particularly in the realm of parenting, following an occupational stressor, notably on-duty child deaths. Given this focus, it was imperative for the researcher to acknowledge and document any limitations in the study's designs or methodology that could have influenced the interpretation of the findings. Furthermore, a detailed account of how these challenges were addressed was provided.

The sample size for this study was 8-15 participants. The researcher reached saturation when no new ideas were expressed by participants, and this occurred at

participant eight. As mentioned in Chapter 4, evidence of trustworthiness was established through an audit trail using verbatim transcripts, peer review notes, and direct quotes from the participants along with psychological expressions outlined in this researcher's notes.

Violanti et al. (2019) highlighted how perception significantly shapes how LEOs choose to communicate their experiences with stress and mental health issues to others, often leading to restricted disclosure or complete self-withholding of such information. Recognizing this, the present researcher endeavored to establish rapport and create a comfortable interview environment, despite the constraints associated with audio conferencing. Such an atmosphere fostered sincerity and authenticity in both parties, facilitating an open dialogue. Throughout the interview process, a conscious effort was made to avoid conveying personal beliefs or assumptions about the phenomenon or population, aiming to prevent any potential bias or hindrance to participants' contributions.

To optimize data collection, this researcher employed an interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions, supplemented by probing inquiries when deemed necessary. It was assumed that participants responded openly and honestly to all interview questions, acknowledging the potential limitations of this approach. While the findings were not intended for broad generalization to all police officers beyond those specified in the inclusion criteria, the insights gained from participant interviews offer valuable information that holds relevance for the broader field of law enforcement.

An inherent limitation commonly associated with qualitative research, including phenomenological studies, is its propensity to generate less quantifiable evidence compared to quantitative counterparts. This holds particularly true for a phenomenological exploration addressing a gap in the existing literature, as exemplified by this study's focus on the experiences of parenting changes following an on-duty child death. Functioning as an exploratory endeavor, this research serves as a catalyst for further investigation into the phenomenon, with the subsequent implementation of a quantitative design poised to offer more robust and comprehensive descriptive evidence. While quantitative studies can establish a more representative understanding of the targeted population, the qualitative component embedded in this study offered a limited snapshot of the changes in parenting following an officer's experience of an on-duty child death. It is essential to acknowledge that the findings of this study were derived from the qualitative interpretation of shared experiences from a specific group of eight participants, and generalizability to a broader context may be constrained.

Recommendations

Understanding officers' motivations and backgrounds can inform community policing initiatives. Efforts can be directed towards building bridges between law enforcement and communities, fostering mutual understanding, and addressing systemic issues that impact both officers and residents. Initiatives promoting mentorship and peer support within law enforcement agencies can be developed to assist early career officers. Sharing experiences and guidance can help these officers navigate the challenges they face and foster a supportive environment.

The heightened sensitivity of police officers to child safety can contribute to advocacy for policies that prioritize child welfare. This may lead to the development of community programs, educational initiatives, or legislative changes aimed at enhancing child safety. Acknowledging and addressing the emotional intensity experienced by officers can drive social change by advocating for improved mental health support within law enforcement. This includes initiatives to reduce stigma, enhance counseling services, and prioritize the well-being of officers.

Social change efforts can focus on integrating comprehensive training and education for law enforcement personnel, particularly addressing the cumulative impact of on-duty child deaths. This may involve periodic mental health check-ins, trauma-informed training, and resources for coping and resilience. Recognizing the impact on parenting styles, social change initiatives may involve the development of family support programs tailored for law enforcement families. These programs could provide resources, counseling, and community-building to help officers and their families navigate the unique challenges they face. Addressing the emotional impact on officers involves challenging stigmas associated with seeking mental health support. Social change efforts can work towards destigmatizing mental health discussions within law enforcement and promoting a culture where seeking help is normalized.

Social change initiatives can advocate for a more holistic approach to policing, recognizing the interconnectedness of officers' personal and professional lives. This may involve systemic changes in training, policies, and support structures to foster the well-being of law enforcement personnel. Efforts to enhance community engagement and

collaboration between law enforcement and the public can contribute to social change. Building trust and understanding can lead to more effective and compassionate policing practices. The findings from studies on the intersection of law enforcement experiences and personal life can inform evidence-based policy development. This includes policies related to mental health, family support, and overall officer well-being.

Exploring the intersection of policing and parenthood, particularly in the context of on-duty events involving child fatalities, offers a unique and important avenue for future research. To further advance our understanding of the implications for police officers' parenting, the following research recommendations are proposed. Conduct longitudinal studies that track parenting changes among police officers over an extended period following exposure to on-duty events, such as child deaths. This approach would provide insights into the long-term impact on parenting practices, familial relationships, and the overall well-being of both officers and their children.

Undertaking a comparative analysis between officers who have experienced on-duty child deaths and those who have not. This comparative perspective can reveal specific challenges, coping mechanisms, and changes in parenting styles that arise in response to traumatic events, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play. Investigate the effectiveness of existing support mechanisms and interventions aimed at assisting officers in managing the emotional impact of on-duty child deaths on their parenting. This research could assess the role of counseling, peer support, and training programs in promoting healthier coping strategies within the family context.

Developing and evaluating family resilience programs tailored to the unique challenges faced by police officers following traumatic incidents. These programs could focus on enhancing communication within families, fostering emotional resilience, and providing resources for parents to navigate the complexities of discussing challenging topics with their children. Explore the impact of a parent's exposure to traumatic events on their children's well-being. This research could investigate the coping strategies employed by children of police officers, the development of resilience, and potential challenges in their social and emotional growth.

Considering cultural and gender perspectives in understanding how police officers from diverse backgrounds experience changes in parenting following on-duty events. Recognizing the influence of cultural norms and gender roles can contribute to tailored support strategies that acknowledge and respect individual differences. Develop and assess the effectiveness of training programs that focus on improving family communication skills for police officers. This could involve providing guidance on discussing challenging topics, managing stress collectively, and fostering an open and supportive family environment. Examine the role of organizational policies in supporting officers' families following traumatic events. Evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies and identifying potential areas for improvement can inform organizational practices that prioritize the well-being of both officers and their families. By addressing these research recommendations, scholars can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between law enforcement duties and parenting

responsibilities, ultimately guiding the development of supportive policies, programs, and interventions for police officers and their families.

Implications

In Theme 1, the participants consistently expressed a heightened sense of vigilance and sensitivity to child safety in their parenting practices. The experience of responding to on-duty child deaths had a profound impact on their approach to parenting. This theme underscored how the occupational stressors associated with police work, especially dealing with child fatalities, resulted in a pervasive sense of vigilance and caution among the participants. The narratives demonstrated a shift towards more cautious parenting behaviors, such as increased supervision, setting strict rules, and actively addressing potential risks.

In Theme 2, the emotional intensity of on-duty child deaths emerged as a significant theme, revealing the profound impact these experiences had on the officers. The vivid descriptions of distressing scenes and emotional responses underscored the challenging nature of their work. This theme highlighted the emotional toll of responding to child fatalities, emphasizing the need for emotional resilience in coping with the distressing scenes and the deeply affecting nature of the work.

Theme 3 underscored the cumulative effect of multiple experiences and was evident in the participants' narratives, emphasizing how exposure to multiple on-duty child deaths shaped their perspectives and parenting styles over time. The participants discussed how these cumulative experiences influenced their perceptions of negligence, their parenting decisions, and their overall approach to safety and protection. This theme

highlighted the long-term impact of repeated exposure to traumatic events on the officers' attitudes and behaviors.

Within Theme 4, participants described adjustments in their parenting styles over time, reflecting an evolution in their approach to raising children. The narratives suggested a transition from initial hypervigilance and overprotectiveness to a more nuanced understanding of their parenting practices. This theme emphasized the dynamic nature of the participants' parenting styles, influenced by both the cumulative impact of on-duty child deaths and personal growth and reflection.

Theme 5 exposed the participants' career journeys and shed light on the motivations and pathways that led them to become police officers. This theme provided context for understanding their perspectives, highlighting a variety of motivations, including a desire for purpose, bridging the gap between law enforcement and the community, family influences, and a sense of duty. Exploring their career journeys contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the participants' backgrounds and motivations.

Further, in Theme 6, the participants' early career experiences in law enforcement provided insights into the formative period of their professional lives. This theme revealed the diverse roles and responsibilities they undertook, ranging from patrol officers to specialized units, showcasing the breadth of experiences that contributed to their development as police officers. Understanding their early career experiences was crucial for contextualizing their responses to on-duty child deaths.

Finally, within Theme 7, the emotional impact underscored the coping mechanisms employed by officers, including compartmentalization and desensitization, to navigate the emotional challenges associated with their work. The narratives revealed a complex interplay between professional responsibilities and personal emotions, with officers describing the need to compartmentalize to perform their duties effectively. This theme highlighted the emotional toll of their work and the coping strategies adopted to manage it.

The findings suggested that the participants' experiences with on-duty child deaths have far-reaching consequences, influencing not only their professional lives but also shaping their identities as parents. The interplay between occupational stressors, emotional intensity, cumulative effects, and adjustments in parenting styles provides a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between policing and parenthood. The insights gained from this study contributed to the broader discourse on the impact of trauma on law enforcement professionals and the need for comprehensive support mechanisms within the policing community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the existing body of research underscores the profound impact of occupational stress on law enforcement personnel, manifesting in a range of adverse outcomes such as diminished job performance, maladaptive behaviors, and personality changes. The coping strategies employed by officers in response to stress vary widely, encompassing both healthy and unhealthy mechanisms. Importantly, literature has established that LEOs frequently encounter potentially traumatic events within the scope

of their duties, further affecting their mental health and well-being. This impact extends to the development of conditions such as PTSD, panic disorder, major depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse.

Through the lens of the work–family conflict theory, the literature has delineated the intricate interplay between organizational and operational stressors in law enforcement and their subsequent influence on family life, with reciprocal effects on job duties. The evolution of parenting studies, rooted in attachment styles and behavioral paradigms, has contributed significantly to understanding family dynamics. However, a notable gap persists in comprehending how specific potentially traumatic events, particularly on-duty child deaths, distinctly shape a police officer's parenting style. The present study sought to address this gap by focusing on the officer's perception of changes in their parenting experience following such an event. By examining this specific facet, the research endeavors to contribute valuable insights to the broader discourse on occupational stress, family dynamics, and the intricate interplay between the personal and professional lives of LEOs. The findings from this study have the potential to inform interventions, support mechanisms, and policies tailored to the unique challenges posed by on-duty traumatic events in the context of law enforcement parenting.

This phenomenological study embarked on a quest to illuminate the nuanced landscape of parenting style changes experienced by LEOs in the aftermath of an on-duty child death. The study, involving eight actively serving full-time LEOs, employed semistructured interviews as a methodological cornerstone, allowing for a deep and immersive exploration of participants' lived experiences. The careful design of the study

facilitated meaningful engagement, ensuring the researcher was attuned to the participants' unique perspectives on the phenomenon. Interview questions, guided the dialogue, augmented by probing questions that enhanced data richness, analysis, and interpretation. Rigorous ethical considerations underscored the process, with Informed Consent and a Statement of Confidentiality provided to each participant, and the safeguarding of anonymity through the use of aliases. The research methodology underwent a robust peer review, involving a clinical forensic psychology student versed in qualitative research design and a provisionally licensed clinical psychologist. This scrutiny aimed to verify findings, scrutinize the research design, and offer feedback to unearth any potential researcher bias.

Beyond the academic realm, this study aspired to catalyze positive social change by fostering a deeper understanding of how an on-duty child death impacts a police officer's parenting style. The study's ultimate goal was to inform interventions by police departments, chaplains, and mental health professionals, both in the aftermath of such tragic events and in proactive preparation for potential on-duty child deaths. Through these comprehensive efforts, this research endeavored to contribute not only to academic knowledge but to the well-being of LEOs and their families in the face of profound challenges.

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Appendix A: Participant Invitation

Letter to Participant

Name of Participant: Date:

Address:

Dear (Name),

My name is Jennifer M. Sellers, and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting dissertation research on officer perceptions of parenting experience changes following an on-duty child death. There are numerous research studies detailing the types of stressors officers encounter while on-duty, the impact of those stressors on officer's spouses, mental health symptoms officers experience related to these stressors, the type of mental health assistance they seek and/or afforded to them, and the stigma associated with seeking mental health help. What is not known, however, is how officers perceive their parenting experience change following an on-duty child death. This research will provide insight into nature of officer's parenting experiences after they experience the potentially traumatic event of an on-duty child death.

I am aware that due to the nature of the job you do, your time is important. I truly appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. To be a participant in this study, you need to be an active-duty (40hr minimum weekly) police officer, have one or more child/children (biological, adopted, or stepchildren), and have experienced an on-duty child death (regardless of type). If you meet these criteria, I would like to invite you to meet me for a private interview that would last approximately one hour. This meeting can be held at a private conference/meeting room of a public setting (i.e., library) of your choosing if you are close in location to me. If not, I will meet you via TEAMS, in a private, virtual meeting. This meeting will not require you to do anything beyond your level of comfortability. This meeting is designed to spend some time getting to know you and better learn about your experience of parenting changes following an on-duty child death. Any and all information gathered during our meeting will be kept strictly confidential.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience to schedule a date and time that we can meet. My telephone number is [redacted]. You can also email me at [redacted], or [redacted]. I look forward to hearing from you.

Jennifer M. Sellers
Doctoral Candidate
Walden University

Appendix B: Peer Reviewer Statement of Confidentiality

Peer Reviewer Statement of Confidentiality
Police Officer Perceptions of Parenting Experience Changes Following an On-Duty Child Death
Walden University

I attest that I am a peer reviewer for this study and as a peer reviewer, I understand that the duty of confidentiality is important to the fidelity of this research study and prohibits me from purposefully disclosing confidential information. The duty of confidentiality further requires me to act with due diligence and the utmost care with the information provided by the participants in this study to avoid any disclosure of confidential information. Confidential information includes the identity of the subjects, their interview responses, and all other information provided to the researcher by them.

Additionally, I understand that as a reviewer of this study, my duty to confidentiality extends beyond the time this study takes place. Confidentiality will apply to any and all information and materials I had access to during the time I acted in the role as a reviewer.

As a peer reviewer for this study, I shall ensure that I will not use or make available any content within this study to anyone or any third party nor will any of the information be used by me or any third party at any time. I agree to take all reasonable steps to ensure that no use by me, or by any third parties. I agree to return all documentation I received for the purpose of review to Jennifer M. Sellers and will not retain any copies of such documentation.

I agree and understand that any deviation from this confidential agreement may be grounds for dismissal as a peer reviewer and potential legal action.

I agree that I have read the above information about this study and the confidential nature of this study. I agree that if I have any questions about this study I will ask, and the researcher will provide answers. I agree I will comply with this confidentiality statement.

Printed Name of Peer Reviewer: _____
Date Reviewed and Signed: _____
Peer Reviewer Signature: _____
Researcher's Signature: _____

Appendix C: Organizational Authorization to Conduct Research

July 3, 2023

Dear Walden University IRB,

Please consider this letter as your full authorization to use LEAPS as your research mechanism for your study with law enforcement trauma and children. Your idea is brilliant, and we are in such desperate need of this study. Of the more than 2,800 members of LEAPS, many, if not all, will have experience of trauma involving children.

I am familiar with research that says seeing children as victims traumatizes law enforcement more than any other calls, but I do not know of research that digs deeper into the topic to learn how experiencing this trauma changed the law enforcement officers. This is absolutely a much-needed study and I congratulate you for creating the idea.

When you are ready, I will notify the members that you will be conducting this research including in-depth interviews. Our members will share my excitement and will provide you with their absolute full cooperation in this study. I look forward to assisting you with anything you need to accomplish this task. Once you begin and I notify the members, I will provide you the email addresses so you may contact them directly.

Thank you so much for doing this. I think this study will save lives, careers, relationships, and improve the overall health of our officers and dispatchers.

Sincerely,

Timothy Jay Rutledge
Founder and Director
Law Enforcement Alliance for Peer Support