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Psychological Experiences of Law Enforcement Officers Responding to Critical Incidents Alone and With a Partner

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Lydia M. Abernethy

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2026

Abstract

Psychological Experiences of Law Enforcement Officers Responding to Critical

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by

Lydia M. Abernethy

MPhil, Walden University, 2024

MS, Liberty University, 2021

BS, Moody Bible Institute, 2020

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

February 2026

Abstract

The role of law enforcement officers is to restore peace and safety when chaos occurs, which can be life-threatening and stressful as officers respond to the critical incidents unfolding. For this study, a qualitative approach and phenomenological framework were utilized to gain insight into the first-hand psychological experiences of officers responding to critical incidents. Police officers work in demanding environments that can lead to mental health conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Peer support and communication among coworkers have emerged as a potentially important factor, as officers would share traumatic events with other officers. Therefore, my research focused on the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner, which the research questions directly addressed. Nine participants were interviewed for this research study, who shared their experiences responding to critical incidents. Participants in this study described critical incidents as involving injury and mental components, the violence and psychological impacts on the participants, being conscious of the possible situations and gathering information, the importance of safety and communication, and participants reported a preference in responding to incidents with a partner. This study is important for making a positive impact as it expands on the knowledge of law enforcement officers' interactions with the community during critical incidents that can inform policies and procedures for police departments, focusing on the safety of officers and the communities they serve.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my late uncle, Houston Police Officer Timothy Scott Abernethy #615, who was shot and killed in the line of duty during the pursuit of an armed offender on December 7, 2008. You are my inspiration, and I love and miss you.

To my late father, Christopher Jon Abernethy, I will forever love and miss you. I promise to make you proud.

Finally, to my family and friends, especially my mom, who always support my ambitious adventures and lovingly encourage the pursuit of my dreams, thank you. I love you all.

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Finally, I would like to acknowledge my fellow colleagues in the Chicago Police Department who have lost their lives in the line of duty while courageously responding to critical incidents in the service of their community. None of you will ever be forgotten.

- Chicago Police Officer Ella French #15013 E.O.W. August 7, 2021
- Chicago Police Officer Andres Vasquez-Lasso #7649 E.O.W. March 1, 2023
- Chicago Police Officer Areanah Preston #15870 E.O.W. May 6, 2023
- Chicago Police Officer Luis Huesca #18913 E.O.W. April 21, 2024
- Chicago Police Officer Enrique Martinez #8314 E.O.W. November 4, 2024
- Chicago Police Officer Krystal Rivera #19020 E.O.W. June 5, 2025

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Law enforcement officers bear a significant responsibility in navigating critical incidents that can be extremely stressful, have potential social repercussions, and carry life-or-death consequences for the officers involved (Di Nota et al., 2024). The stress that emerges from the responsibilities of the policing occupation can place significant psychological demands on the officers serving in this role (Lee & Wu, 2024). The calls police receive can be unpredictable, ranging from simple things such as assisting a citizen with a broken-down vehicle to responding to a fresh homicide with a chaotic scene. In the current criminal justice system, law enforcement is primarily responsible for the immediate custody of crime scenes, protecting evidence, and ensuring public safety (Wickenheiser, 2023). The job responsibilities that accompany policing can be stressful on the officers tasked with completing them.

Critical incidents can be a stressful job responsibility for police officers who are called to handle them (Drew & Williamson, 2024). Officers do not have the privilege of choosing the calls they respond to, but rather are assigned to calls that then fall under their responsibility to handle. Not only do law enforcement officers experience these situations at work, but they also experience these critical incidents and trauma on a regular and even daily basis (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). The cumulative traumatic events that accompany policing can impact officers in a long-term scope as well as the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Craddock & Telesco, 2022). Critical incidents can be a source of significant stress for officers who are experiencing them throughout their daily duties.

The stressful demands placed on police officers during their work come with a price that can take its toll on the body (Violanti et al., 2017). The prices officers are faced with can impact their present and future functioning, both in their professional and personal lives. Frequent exposure to critical incidents can lead to a chronic state of overload that can ultimately lead to the dysregulation of stress-protective systems, which can leave the body vulnerable due to abnormal functioning (Giessing et al., 2020). Stress not only impacts surface-level functioning but also the operation of the body as a whole, including the unconscious operations.

The stress from critical incidents can lead to autonomic nervous system activation with an increase of sympathetic modulation that increases physiological responses such as heart rate, breath acceleration, blood pressure, etc. (Bustamante-Sánchez et al., 2020). The physiological changes help to prepare the body in response to survive the presented threat and return the body to its natural state of homeostasis. When facing threatening situations, the body responds with things such as restricting blood flow to organs and redirecting more blood to the active muscles, mental activity, blood coagulation, and more (Chu et al., 2024). When officers are faced with threats in critical incidents, their bodies naturally respond physiologically to protect and prepare them to survive.

Faced with the threats present in critical incidents and the changes occurring within the body to handle the situation, law enforcement officers must cope with these constant fluctuations throughout their tours of duty. Work stress, including physical and psychological threats, administrative and organizational pressures, and lack of support, can be associated with high symptoms of depression for police officers (Allison et al.,

2019). Additional research shows that police officers are also at risk of developing PTSD due to the traumatic experiences they are regularly exposed to (Baker et al., 2024).

Depression and PTSD are only a couple of the psychological conditions that can emerge from the stress of critical incidents, impacting the functioning of officers in their professional lives as well as their quality of life, which can spill over into their personal lives.

When faced with the psychological impacts that can emerge from critical incidents, officers can find commonalities when speaking to peers who have experienced the same or similar situations. Peer support is more than just conversations; it helps to enhance the knowledge of mental health among officers and reduce the stigma surrounding it (Milliard, 2020). Peers provide a unique opportunity to support their coworkers through understanding and can guide other officers on how to get the help they need through available resources. Peer support programs are designed to provide mental health resources to officers who are frequently exposed to stress and trauma at work and may need crisis intervention-like services (Fallon et al., 2023). When police department officers have peer support programs, they can be seen as the first line of defense and something officers feel more comfortable approaching for help rather than going straight to a mental health professional (Van Hasselt et al., 2019). Speaking and interacting with peers can help officers process critical incidents and obtain the resources they may need to help them through these experiences.

In law enforcement, officers can be assigned to work their shifts alone, while at other times they can be assigned to work with a partner. A study that was conducted with

police officers asked participants to rank their job priorities; the results showed that good coworkers and conflict-free collaboration with others were ranked among the highest reported priorities (Basinska & Dåderman, 2019). Officers frequently interact with others, including partners, which makes trust and collaboration among them an important factor. Some officers work more naturally as a team, while others may work better alone. Officers who are used to working in team settings and with others can be more efficient at working with partners (Simpson & Grossman, 2024). Despite these few studies, there is still little research conducted on work partners for police officers, and this study seeks to gather information on this gap. Chapter 1 will consist of the background information, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, definitions, assumptions, limitations, and significance of this study.

Background

Critical incidents are part of the occupation of law enforcement officers as they hold the great responsibility of handling the potential life-threatening incidents they are called to (Roscoe et al., 2024). Officers do not know the outcome of the calls they are dispatched to until they have concluded, which can present great stress with the potential dangers that may arise. The longer officers are on the job, the more exposure and experience they have with traumatic events (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). These potential traumatic situations are unavoidable for officers who are dispatched to restore safety and peace within communities.

The dangerous situations officers are placed in can seriously impact their functioning under stress through physiological changes (Chen & Wu, 2022), including

heart rate (Anderson et al., 2002). Under tremendous stress, hormones are suddenly dumped into the body's system that can alter the normal state of functioning. The hormones can impact cognitive and behavioral functioning as they are secreted by the sympathetic nervous system and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical axis (Langer et al., 2025). As these hormones flood into the body, it prepares itself to handle the presented stressors that make the situation critical.

As officers continue through their careers, they are more susceptible to experiencing critical incidents and the impactful trauma that accompanies them. The continuous stress from critical incidents can lead to detrimental long-term impacts on the officers experiencing them. With the unavoidable nature of traumatic situations for law enforcement officers and the potential negative impacts that can exist, it is necessary to focus on this area of research.

Problem Statement

Traumatic incidents can be life-threatening or present considerable threats to an individual's physical and mental health (Fuller et al., 2023). Critical incidents are non-negotiable experiences for law enforcement officers as they form some of the work officers do and cannot be removed (Drew & Williamson, 2024). Officers can experience critical incidents at varying rates, as population size and crime rates can factor into call volume. As stressful and traumatic as these moments can be, officers do not have the option of choosing not to experience them. Regular exposure to critical incidents has been consistently found to be associated with higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (Melander et al., 2024). With the potential negative implications of

these incidents, it is necessary to understand them from the officer's perspective. The problem is the lack of understanding of the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers experiencing critical incidents alone and with a partner. This study sought to discover necessary data for understanding the psychological experiences of officers responding to critical incidents from their first-hand accounts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers during critical incidents alone and with a partner. Existing research has studied the functions of officers during critical incidents and even the perceptions of one-unit and two-unit patrols, but not specifically during the encounter of stressful and traumatic encounters such as critical incidents. Law enforcement departments cannot always send two-unit patrols to calls that require them; instead, only one-unit patrols are available, leaving officers to respond to these incidents alone (Simpson & Grossman, 2024). With the humanity of officers that exists, looking into the experiences of officers from their perspectives is beneficial for developing further understanding of the police occupation and their interactions with the community. This study contributed to filling the gap in understanding officers' psychological experiences and perceptions of critical incidents, specifically with and without a partner.

Research Questions

This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers during critical incidents. The two research questions for this study are:

RQ 1: What are the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone?

RQ 2: What are the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents with a partner?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

In this study, the cognitive appraisal theory and the social support theory were utilized to design its structure and research questions. The concept of the cognitive appraisal theory is the individual's interpretation of an encounter that impacts the extent to which the event is perceived as stressful (Campbell et al., 2013). Another important aspect is the idea that emotions are produced from the interpretations of the experiences of individuals (Yeo & Ong, 2024). With this theory, researchers can study comprehensive views of the emotions and interpretations of individuals during stressful encounters. The cognitive appraisal theory appropriately fits with this study due to the comprehensive view of emotions and interpretations that can be discovered in police officer encounters with critical incidents.

The social support theory is the second theory that was chosen for this study. The concept of the social support theory is the idea that the organized networks of human relations can help individuals meet both their expressive and instrumental needs (Colvin et al., 2002). An important aspect is the idea that the societies that affect the balance of the individual's agendas with concern for the needs of others can be successful in establishing social values that help guide their decision-making (Chamlin & Cochran, 1997). With this theory, researchers can study the relationships and support systems of

individuals alongside individual experiences and perspectives. The social support theory appropriately fits with this study due to the considerations of the support systems law enforcement officers have when experiencing critical incidents.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study utilized a qualitative methods approach to expand on the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers. The focus was the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents, with a second focus on looking at the experiences of officers responding alone and with a partner. The stress and trauma that emerge from critical incidents can impact officers and the perceptions they have (Arble et al., 2019; Craddock & Telesco, 2022). After looking through previous literature on this topic area, the perceptions of officers responding to these incidents were identified as an important area to gain understanding. This study focused specifically on the experiences of officers responding with and without a partner.

To gather the data, interviews were conducted with active law enforcement officers to gather their first-hand experiences with critical incidents. The participants who met the inclusion criteria were selected to participate in the study. The created interview guide was used to guide the semistructured interview with predetermined questions and room for follow-up questions as applicable. Upon conclusion, each of these interviews was transcribed and coded using Amedeo Giorgi's coding process with a focus on thematic identification. As the interviews were coded and themes emerged, they concluded upon reaching data saturation, in which new themes were no longer emerging. The data gathered were analyzed for conclusions regarding officer experiences under

stress. This study was inspired by previous research findings to fill the identified gap in this area of research. The potential knowledge that lies in this gap provides a better understanding of the available data and informs future policies, as well as police-community interactions.

Definitions

Critical incidents: A stressful work-related event that can produce significant physical, cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral reactions in emergency personnel during the incident or have the ability to overwhelm the individual's coping skills later (PER-064, Rev. 2023). Critical incidents can include, but are not limited to, line-of-duty shootings, deaths, suicides, serious injuries, homicides, and hostage incidents that can leave officers with an overwhelming sense of vulnerability and lack of control (Federal Bureau of Investigation's Critical Incident, 1999).

Fight-flight-freeze: A stress response from the body as a way to face perceived threats by urging the body to face the threat aggressively, run from the danger, or the inability to act against the threat (Bhandari, 2024).

Partner: A law enforcement officer assigned to work alongside another law enforcement officer in the same patrol unit designation (e.g., the same patrol vehicle).

Peer support: A peer can be described as someone who shares demographic or social similarities and provides support to those with similar experiences or situations (Penney, 2019).

Physiology: The science of organism functioning, including the chemical and physical processes involved and the activities of the cells, tissues, and organs (Physiology, n.d.).

Stress: A psychological or physiological response to internal or external stressors that affect various systems of the body (Stress, n.d.).

Trauma: A disturbing experience that results in fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on an individual's attitude, behavior, and other areas of functioning (Trauma, n.d.).

Assumptions

This qualitative study included several assumptions regarding the participants. Critical incidents can trigger adverse emotional responses such as feelings of helplessness and intense sorrow, with a possibility of a diminished sense of self-worth as well (Melander et al., 2024). With this in mind, I assumed that participants could be reluctant to fully share or disclose their experiences surrounding critical incidents due to the emotional responses that may occur from recalling them. I also assumed that participants were honest in establishing their fulfillment of the inclusion criteria and honest throughout the interviews, not withholding information or purposely providing answers that would persuade a particular outcome. The interview guide and its inclusion of open-ended questions helped to promote comprehensive responses from the participants while avoiding leading answers.

Scope and Delimitations

The intent of this study was to discover information regarding the gap in the data of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents. This area was chosen due to the importance of officers' and citizens' safety during stressful encounters. Officers are assaulted and killed by citizens every year, and citizens are also killed by officers during these encounters. Despite the dangers that surround critical incidents, these events are non-modifiable and integrated into the work police officers do, regardless of the dangers presented (Drew & Williamson, 2024). Understanding the psychological experiences of officers during these encounters informs safety considerations in valuable ways.

As the researcher, I was the primary data collector for this study via interviews with active law enforcement officer participants. These interviews focused primarily on the psychological experiences of officers responding to critical incidents. Participants were recruited through social media platforms and professional networks. The data from the interviews were analyzed to discover the narratives of the participants and the themes contained within them.

Delimitations in this study included only interviewing active law enforcement officers in the state of Illinois. Being an active law enforcement officer was important in providing relevant information during the interviews regarding officer experiences. The eligibility criteria included: (a) an active law enforcement officer in the state of Illinois, (b) 4 or more years working in law enforcement, (c) experience with critical incidents alone and with a partner, and (d) does not know me, and I do not know the individual.

Limitations

It is important to recognize the limitations of a good study by describing them and explaining any implications they may have in the study, as well as describing the steps to mitigate them (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). A significant way to mitigate a study's limitations is to identify and consider each of them during the planning phase before the data is gathered (Shreffler & Huecker, 2023). In light of this, the following limitations have been identified and listed in an effort to mitigate them. One limitation of this study is the sample size, as the number of participants was small compared to the larger represented population. The lack of a larger participant size could have limited the possible information gathered on the subject during the interviews. The participants' status as active law enforcement officers could also have limited the information they were allowed to disclose in the interview due to confidentiality and sensitivity. The police participants may have been more reserved in sharing information regarding their experience due to potential or perceived repercussions from their employers. Another limitation could have been biases from me toward the data gathered and the interpretation of the analyzed results. Throughout the research process, I kept a reflective journal of my thoughts and feelings. I also committed to ensuring an open-minded approach to the data received to separate any potential biases that could have arisen. With any potential biases that could have arisen, I spoke with my chair and committee members and leaned on them to identify any potential biases throughout the research process as well.

Significance

The gap in this study was addressed by the research regarding the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. Existing research has studied the impacts that the stress from critical incidents can have on officers; however, these studies have not addressed the psychological experiences of the officers responding alone and with a partner. Simpson and Grossman (2024) conducted a study on one-unit and two-unit patrol calls for service volume, but they did not look into the perceptions of officers during critical incidents. Continuous exposure to trauma and critical incidents can hurt the physical and mental well-being of officers who have long-term exposure to these events (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). The seriousness of the situations presented in critical incidents makes it necessary to expand the understanding surrounding them.

The contribution of the findings of this study further knowledge to the field of police response under stress to critical incidents while considering partner status. During these crucial moments, each decision and every minute can impact the outcome, including the safety of those involved. Understanding the first-hand experiences of officers during these critical moments helps to build a broader understanding of critical incident response. This addition to the literature in this field could have implications for policy changes, development, and reform concerning law enforcement response to critical incidents.

Summary

Law enforcement is a stressful occupation that can involve frequent challenging exposures to critical incidents, including traumatic and life-threatening events that can impact mental health outcomes (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). Officers cannot avoid the calls they are dispatched to, having to handle them regardless of the danger that may present. The stress from these situations can cause physiological and psychological changes, which can lead to more long-term changes if exposure is prolonged (Chu et al., 2024). After critical incidents, peer support can help officers process what they have experienced and witnessed. Peer support can come from coworkers who have experienced similar incidents and can provide resources to officers in need of assistance. Officers can often work with their peers as partners throughout their tours of duty, but there is little research that has been conducted on police work partner status when responding to calls for services. This study sought to gather information on the gap in research involving partner status with law enforcement officers. Chapter 2 will include an overview of the literature gathered on this topic and all the themes discovered throughout the process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. The cognitive appraisal theory and social support theory were applied to gain a better understanding of assessing stressors and outcomes, while also considering the potential influence of social support. With this method and these theories in mind, law enforcement officers' experiences and perceptions regarding critical incidents were explored, with partner status as the focus area.

Law enforcement officers often respond to critical incidents during their tours of duty (Drew & Williamson, 2024). These incidents can be stressful and unpredictable, with multiple factors influencing them and outcomes being unknown until they are fully concluded. Even with the unknown and unexpected aspects, law enforcement officers are required to make immediate decisions that could potentially have great consequences (Arble et al., 2019). Regardless of the unknown elements and danger that surround critical incidents, law enforcement officers must still respond and restore safety. Danger is a central theme in the policing profession as officers must respond to crime and engage with potential offenders using the training they receive in the police academy (Sierra-Arévalo, 2021). Law enforcement officers do not have the option to run away from the dangers present in critical incidents. Instead, they must run toward and face the danger and threats presented.

The unknown danger accompanying critical incidents can lead to stress developed in law enforcement officers who must respond to them. Critical incidents can produce stress from certain stimuli, including those experienced during traumatic events (Gutschmidt & Vera, 2021). Not knowing the outcome of dangerous encounters can be stressful for officers, who may be unsure if they will go home at the end of their shift. The stress can come from critical incidents that expose officers to danger, physical threats, and unpredictability (Beleke & Mengesha, 2023). According to Green et al. (2023), officers do not have the full picture of what has occurred and is happening until after they arrive on the scene, gather information, and the preliminary investigation begins. While responding to incidents initially, officers are limited in the information regarding the situation they are encountering, including the individuals they are encountering, the context, and the preceding events. Not having all the information regarding a traumatic incident can be stressful for officers who are unaware of the extent of the situation they are walking into. This stress can have serious effects on the officers who are responding.

The stress from critical incidents can result in physiological changes that react to the physical demands of stressful situations. Physical training for officers is not only important to support the demands of policing and build enhanced job performance, but also to build mental preparation as well (Lockie et al., 2020). Officers can experience faster breathing, adrenaline rises that can cause shaking, overwhelming stimuli that divide attention, and more when responding to critical incidents threatening their safety or the safety of others. While these physiological changes can alter the physical response,

these changes can also help the body meet the necessary demands arising from the critical incident (Baldwin et al., 2019). The physiological changes are the body's natural way of protecting itself against stressful stimuli, but they still affect officers' responses during stressful encounters.

Amid the stress from critical incidents, officers must still learn to function safely and effectively. When job demands are high, such as in critical incidents, it produces stress that can change the performance of law enforcement officers (Perez-Floriano & Gonzalez, 2019). How officers function amid the various stressors is crucial, as they must remember their training and respond according to the law while considering the safety of everyone involved. Stress can be multifaceted, encompassing physiological elements, with its influence on mental health and well-being as well (Ghasemi et al., 2024). Regardless of the stress from critical incidents, officers must practice controlled motor function, memory recall, coordination, and communication with other officers.

Law enforcement officers must interact and work with other officers during everyday jobs and critical incidents. One study with officers showed that the participants reported a greater interest in seeking help from peers as opposed to mental health professionals (Grupe, 2023). Officers experience trauma from critical incidents more than much of the population will ever experience, giving them a unique understanding of each other. Peer support can provide officers with early intervention opportunities through conversations about their mental health that help them learn more about themselves (Milliard, 2020). This support can be both official and unofficial as law enforcement officers interact with each other daily, learning from one another and helping one another

through the stress they experience during traumatic events. Critical incidents can be stressful for law enforcement officers; therefore, it is beneficial to build an understanding of critical incidents by understanding how officers experience these incidents alone and with a partner.

In Chapter 2, an overview of critical incidents in policing is explored through different literature, including research studies. The theories chosen to ground the literature and ideas of this study are the cognitive appraisal theory and the social support theory. The cognitive appraisal theory examines how individuals assess different events they experience, considering potential outcomes, making it applicable for officers experiencing critical incidents as they evaluate what is occurring and the resources available to them. Similarly, the social support theory examines the potential impact of social support on how individuals perceive and navigate experiences, making it applicable to officers experiencing critical incidents involving colleague or partner support. To begin understanding why this study is important, knowledge and previous research on how law enforcement officers experience the stress from incidents of crisis are first introduced. Physiological changes can occur as a result of the stress from incidents, impacting officer function and processing. Despite the stress, officers must fulfill their duties, coordinating resources, and managing risks to achieve a safe resolution. Through critical incidents and the nature of law enforcement work, a unique trust can be built among officers who communicate and support one another during such traumatic events.

Literature Search Strategy

The research problem is the lack of understanding of the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. The purpose of this study was to explore the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner to provide a better understanding of safe critical incident response for both officers and the communities they serve. Research in this area demonstrates the impact that critical incidents have on law enforcement officers involved and the experiences they can have during these situations (Arble et al., 2019; Baldwin et al., 2019). The literature search focused on research regarding law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents and their experiences.

The Walden University library was the primary source for the literature, research, sources, and all other peer-reviewed material. The primary secondary source for literature was the Google search engine for additional peer-reviewed material. Multiple databases were utilized, including APA PsychNet, ESBCO, Frontiers, National Library of Medicine, SAGE Journals, Science Direct, and Springer Nature. The variety of databases provided a broad coverage of policing, from physical aspects to psychological ones. The majority of the research was limited to studies published within the past five years. Due to the nature of the topic, an abundance of research was not found on some important aspects. Therefore, in some instances, research older than 5 years was used because of the important implications a research study or piece of literature had. Keywords in search of the literature included *acute*, *adrenaline*, *alone*, *anxiety*, *anticipate*, *asses*, *auditory*,

Autonomic Nervous System, awareness, backup, blood pressure, brain, breathing, build, burnout, camaraderie, cannot avoid, challenge, chaotic, characteristics, chronic, cognitive, collaboration, colleague, collective, communication, community, conscious, control, cooperation, coordination, cope, coping, cortisol, coworker, crime scene, crisis, critical, critical incident, danger, dangerous, death, debrief, decision, de-escalation, demand, depression, duty, duty death, effects, emergency, emotions, environment, environmental stress, epinephrine, evaluate, experience, exposure, fatal, fear, fight flight or freeze, firearm, focus, force, freeze, function, gun, health, heart rate, homeostasis, hormones, Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal Axis, immune, impact, incident, inflammation, information, law enforcement, life-threatening, limited, line of duty, mental health, occupational stress, off-duty, officer, options, overload, partner, peace, peer, peer support, perception, performance, physical, physiological, law enforcement, law enforcement officer, post-traumatic stress disorder, pressure, problem solving, processing, protect, psychological, re-live, resilience, response, responsibility, risk, safe, scenario, sensory, serve, shooting, situational awareness, social support, stimuli, stress, stressor, suicide, suicide by law enforcement, symptoms, threat, training, trauma, trust, unpredictable, use of force, vigilance, violent, visual, weapon, well-being, and witness.

Theoretical Foundation

The world is filled with interactive experiences as people go about their unique lives and make decisions based on personal knowledge and assessments. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described their cognitive appraisal theory as the process of categorizing encounters from various angles as they relate to the impact on one's well-being. This

theory highlights the importance of perception and how individuals evaluate the circumstances they encounter to inform their decisions. Lazarus and Folkman emphasize in their cognitive appraisal theory the centrality of the cognitive component of emotions and how one's interpretations are experienced, imagined, or remembered in situations that heighten emotions (Yeo & Ong, 2024). Immediately after being presented with stressors, an individual will evaluate the situation for its impact and then determine what outcomes are possible.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) divided the cognitive appraisal theory into two parts, with the first part looking at what is irrelevant, potentially positive, and the stress, including loss or harm. This first assessment aspect is concerned with the thoughts and appraisal surrounding the event itself and what it means for the individual. The second part of the appraisal process is evaluating the event to see what can be done and what potential outcomes can be achieved (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Overall, Lazarus and Folkman's cognitive appraisal theory focuses on the implications of the event for the individual and what potential solutions are available.

The appraisal process is important in the perceptions of individuals during stressful encounters as part of the selection process of strategies to handle and cope with the stressors (Ali et al., 2021). This theory was appropriate for this study because it aligned with the evaluation of the experiences and perceptions of law enforcement officers during critical incidents alone and with a partner. Using the cognitive appraisal theory, a critical incident could be viewed as the first part of the appraisal, while the second is how the officers respond to the stressors presented. The many variables

involved in critical incidents, such as the presence of immediate danger, weapons, time limit, response options, manpower availability, and more, could all influence the seriousness of the situation and the potential outcomes.

Another theory this study recognized as relevant to the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers is Don Drennon-Gala and Francis Cullen's social support theory. With the social support theory, Drennon-Gala and Cullen argued that individuals' beliefs and behaviors are shaped by the support they receive from their social networks (Aldraiweesh & Alturki, 2025). The relationships people have with those around them undoubtedly influence the way they see the world and how they interpret situations. The social support referred to in one's social network is intended to benefit an individual's ability to cope with the stress they encounter (Cohen, 2004). The theory argues that the perceived and received social support from those around them can affect how well the individual handles stressors and their ability to bounce back.

The social support theory was first named in a 1994 address at the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences in Chicago after the preliminary ideas were presented at American Sociological Association meetings in 1992 (Cullen, 1994). Francis Cullen worked in the field of criminology, exploring whether the relationships in one's life could impact encountered situations and what this looked like for crime. Cullen (1994) argued that crime control theories were incomplete as they did not yet look at the softer side of humans and what could be done *for* a person rather than *to* them. Discovering these incomplete aspects of control not only provides an opportunity to potentially improve

crime but also the opportunity to apply these concepts to much broader populations as well.

The social support theory was appropriate for this study because the authors highlighted the importance of law enforcement officers' social support and potential impact. Studies have shown the importance of organizational culture and support in policing, and these factors maintain a role in how officers handle the stressors they are faced with (Gutschmidt & Vera, 2021; Queirós et al., 2020). How officers perceive support from their colleagues, supervisors, and departments can impact officers' stress levels. This further demonstrates the applicability of focusing on the social support theory regarding partner status in officers.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Law enforcement officers can experience stress throughout their careers, which accompanies the occupation in organizational and environmental ways (Violanti et al., 2017). The stress is unavoidable as it is a natural part of responding to criminal calls for service and cannot be separated. Critical incidents are one of these sources of stress that law enforcement officers experience throughout their careers (Hofer et al., 2021). Physiological changes are associated with high-risk situations, such as critical incidents, as they are complex and affect officers in a variety of ways (Baldwin et al., 2019). Through these changes, officers must remain focused on controlling the potential dangers being threatened. During critical incidents, officers can be required to work with other officers to gain control of the situation and resolve the presented issue. Coworker trust can help promote improved communication, relations, and overall interactions when

working with other colleagues (Lambert et al., 2020). During critical incidents, more research on the status of partnership can provide valuable information to elaborate on the understanding of officer experience.

Stress and Crisis

Understanding Stress

The stress law enforcement officers experience while at work and throughout their careers is undeniable as they respond to incidents outside the normal experiences of other professions. Law enforcement officers can experience stressors such as anticipatory stress, exposure to death or serious injury, and other traumatic events as well (Varker et al., 2023). This exposure to stress can build up and accumulate in officers as they respond to different calls for service and experience trauma. Law enforcement officers are at high risk of being exposed to potentially traumatic events that can threaten their lives and well-being (Fuller et al., 2023). The stress that accompanies law enforcement work cannot be avoided, making it necessary to understand the stress officers experience.

Law enforcement officers face numerous challenges throughout their shifts that demand change from their normal states of homeostasis. These sensed threats to homeostasis are met with responses that specifically depend on the situation and the perceived ability to cope with the presented stressor (Chu et al., 2024; James et al., 2023). The stress responses of the body can involve a variety of different symptoms, including mental, emotional, and physical disruptions that may present (Ramanathan & Desrouleaux, 2022). Law enforcement officers can experience each of these disruptions as they are continuously exposed to incidents that demand a variety of responses. In

stressful incidents, officers can be exposed to a range of factors, including the seriousness of the call, such as the presence of weapons, all while navigating the perceived risks involved (Baldwin et al., 2022). Each of these factors can invoke stress responses in officers as they respond to critical incidents.

When officers are met with stressful demands that alter their normal homeostasis state, the various responses that can occur include changes within the body that direct specific focus. Some stress responses can cause anxiety and raise cortisol levels that can affect an officer's attention, shifting their focus to stimulus-driven decision-making (Giessing et al., 2019). Critical incidents in policing can be life-threatening, with officers naturally shifting their focus to survival and safety while facing dangerous stressors. The stressful characteristics of critical incidents are met with the activation of things such as the sympathetic adrenomedullary system (SAM) and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis (Giessing et al., 2019). These systems are stress-activated to help the body meet the demands faced and safely return the body to its normal state of homeostasis when the stressful event has concluded.

Individual Response to Stress

Living organisms experience different levels that are considered to be within normal range, uniquely based on their body's daily operation. When experiencing stress, glucocorticoids play a major role in the activation of the HPA axis, which is activated in response to stressors, acting as the link between perceived stress and physiological reactions (Mbiydzonyuy & Qulu, 2024). The response from the HPA axis happens subconsciously without the organism's conscious thought, as homeostasis is disrupted.

During emergencies, the autonomic nervous system (ANS) is divided into the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems, which maintain homeostasis through neurons that control various organ systems using diverse chemicals and signals (LeBouef et al., 2023). These systems are activated and work in harmony to contribute to the physiological response of law enforcement officers to stress during critical incidents and work toward returning them to a state of homeostasis afterward.

Fight-flight-or-freeze is a phrase that refers to how people react when they are faced with stress and when physiological changes in the body occur. Under stress, norepinephrine and epinephrine are released to activate vasoconstriction, increase blood pressure, heart rate, and more, all to prepare the body for fight-flight-or-freeze (Chu et al., 2024). During critical incidents, law enforcement officers can experience these responses when adrenaline is being secreted to overcome the presented pressure. In a study with Dutch law enforcement officers, the officers reported feeling the biological conceptualizations of fight-flight-or-freeze responses when incidents become chaotic and stressful (Keesman, 2021). With every officer bringing unique experiences to critical incidents, the response they have can differ from officer to officer. For example, the same study with the Dutch officers attributed freezing to feelings of sensory overload, insecurities, fear, and anxiety, just the simple feeling of not knowing what to do next, and more (Keesman, 2021). These officers answered differently based on their experiences and how they individually responded under stress. While one officer may freeze under pressure, another officer may fight the threat in the same situation. Officers are trained

not to freeze or run away under stress, but the scenarios given in training do not cover the vast possibilities of situations that can be presented in real-life situations.

Realistic training situations in law enforcement academies and even during in-service training for current officers are important to provide accurate interpretations of what could occur while on patrol. Realistic training scenarios not only help assess the training agency's efficacy but also bring an understanding of how officers will reasonably respond and perform to true threats (Baldwin et al., 2022). In a scenario in an academy, it could be easier to gain compliance due to liability and injury concerns with the role-players, but it can be much more difficult to gain compliance in real life on patrol. It can be difficult to provide officers with realistic scenarios, as scenarios are only occurrences that might happen in real-life encounters, and ultimately, the officers are aware that the threats during training scenarios will not seriously injure or kill them because it is a controlled environment (Baldwin et al., 2022). While officers are trained on how to respond to different calls, real-life incidents can be vastly different from training scenarios, as they can experience an overload of information that threatens to interfere with responses under stress, as demonstrated by Keesman's (2021) previously mentioned study on Dutch law enforcement officers.

Short-Term and Long-Term Impacts of Stress

Stress can occur both acutely and chronically, referring to the intensity and duration of the stimulus or event. With acute stress, the stimuli can be intense, occurring suddenly and lasting a shorter length of time. During acute stress events, the nervous system helps to activate the abilities of the individual to handle the demands of the

environment or stimuli (Giessing et al., 2020). The sudden onset of these events requires quick reactions to the stimuli to process and overcome the stress presented. One quick reaction to acute stressors is the activation of physiological responses to handle the event and return to the original state of homeostasis (Anderson et al., 2019). These physiological responses under acute stress, such as critical incidents, can include heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, hormones related to stress, and more in law enforcement officers. Law enforcement work frequently presents with acute stressors, including the possibility of multiple incidents spontaneously occurring throughout a single shift (Di Nota et al., 2024), without knowing when they will occur, and without an opportunity to mentally plan (Arble et al., 2019). The acute stressors in critical incidents often require law enforcement officers to respond quickly while their body systems fluctuate in activation to help handle the stressful encounter and return safely to homeostasis.

Due to the nature of law enforcement work, officers can be repeatedly exposed to critical incidents, including stressors that continuously threaten their health and well-being. The wear and tear of experiencing cumulative stress, exhaustion, and continuously activated stress-response systems can lead to chronic stress in law enforcement officers throughout their careers (Giessing et al., 2020). The repeated acute stress officers experience through critical incidents can become regularly anticipated, never knowing when the next source of trauma will present itself and how intense or dangerous it will be. Chronic stress results in the regular release of stress hormones that can affect immune function and inflammation through the release of corticotropin and vasopressin, which stimulate the secretion of glucocorticoids (Lark et al., 2021). Repeated exposure to stress,

such as that experienced in critical incidents, can have consequences on the long-term physical and mental well-being of law enforcement officers (Craddock & Telesco, 2022).

Understanding both acute and chronic stress in regard to law enforcement officers is necessary to expand on the knowledge of critical incidents and how officers experience them. Since stress has to do with the relationship between the person and the environment, this highlights the function of the individual playing an important role as well (Gutschmidt & Vera, 2021). Every officer reacts to critical incidents while bringing past experiences and perspectives to the table. This further highlights the applicability of Edmund Husserl's theory of phenomenology to understand the importance of focusing on law enforcement officers' experiences and perspectives of critical incidents.

Critical Incidents as a Source of Stress

Law enforcement officers have been found to work in demanding environments that can produce a great deal of stress (Chen & Wu, 2022; Deschênes et al., 2018; Violanti et al., 2017). Law enforcement can be one of the most stressful occupations (Queirós et al., 2020), with law enforcement tasks often demanding and consuming the energy and coping resources of officers with work content that brings about stress (Chen & Wu, 2022). Officers working in a constant state of vigilance and facing danger during their tasks can experience these elevated stress levels when compared to other occupations (Deschênes et al., 2018). The high level of life stress that emerges from policing is largely related to the occupational environment and handling the dangerous situations officers encounter (Bishopp et al., 2018). Law enforcement officers hold the

responsibility to respond and complete tasks that are often demanding, regardless of the nature of the incident or how dangerous it may be.

The stress that emerges from officer responsibilities can be generated by responding to critical incidents (Rodriguez et al., 2024). A study of law enforcement officers in New Jersey found that a significant portion of the participants reported job stress, with 20% of all the participants identifying significant stress as stemming from a particular critical incident (Violanti et al., 2006). As officers go through their careers, they carry with them the experience, lessons, and cautions of past critical incidents from one to the next. Officers can receive details about these incidents through emergency calls, but they must still approach and engage in new critical incidents without knowing the potential hidden dangers, outcomes, or similarities to past incidents. Officers must be prepared for threats that are known to them, as well as the possibility of unknown threats that must be identified through perceptions of potential risks (Huhta et al., 2021). These incidents produce stress for officers attempting to control what is known and navigate what is unknown to them to create environments that are safe for both officers and others involved, as well as the community.

Officers can respond to shooting scenes through calls from citizens or, in some jurisdictions, through gunshot detection technology (Lawrence & Novak, 2024). Once on the scene, officers attempt to control the situation through de-escalation, such as calming witnesses, rendering aid, convincing offenders to surrender firearms, and more. Initially, the motive of the shooting may still be unknown to law enforcement, but through preliminary investigations on the scene, they attempt to put the pieces together. Under

time pressures, law enforcement can respond to scenes with limited information that adds to the uncertainty of outcomes (Stenshol et al., 2023). The possible outcomes for critical incidents depend on the totality of an incident's circumstances and can involve potential danger for anyone near the scene.

As officers navigate the unknown and gather information, all motives must be considered as to why an offender has a weapon, including the intention of suicide-by-law enforcement plan. Suicide-by-law enforcement is a phenomenon when people intentionally or unintentionally come into contact with law enforcement and behave or communicate in a way, such as provoking officers with lethal force, that suggests the person wants the law enforcement officers to end their life (Jordan et al., 2019). Exigent circumstances that present, such as offenders pointing guns at others or law enforcement officers, can require the officers to act with little time and limited information for the safety of all others involved. Officers must rely on their instincts, training, and past experiences when encountering individuals who can sometimes display obvious intoxication or psychotic behavior and other times more serious behavior, such as with the presence of a firearm, in which officers can have no way of telling if it is loaded (Weiss, 2023). In these suicide-by-law enforcement encounters, officers must often make critical decisions under stress with limited information and time to process.

One of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, responsibilities of law enforcement is the protection of life, but also the ability to take life when reasonable and necessary. Due to the profession, these powers are both symbolic and sanctioned, as they can use the immediate legal means available to them to wield force and coercion at their discretion

(DeVylder et al., 2020). Taking a human life, regardless of whether the individual provokes it through suicide-by-law enforcement or by violence, is a complicated process that can have tremendous implications on the officer's life afterward. While there has been research on the mental health impacts of the broader subject of critical incidents, there is little research on the mental health aspects of law enforcement officers after fatal use-of-force incidents. An older study conducted by Komarovskaya et al. (2011) on law enforcement officers found that seriously injuring or taking the life of another human in the line of duty was significantly associated with post-traumatic stress symptoms. Responding to critical incidents and having to take the life of another human being can have severe and lasting mental health effects on the law enforcement officers responding.

Officers are often unaware of the extent of the stressful situations they are walking into, even unaware if they will survive to see their families at the end of their shift. This exposure to critical incidents can be hazardous to officers' psychological health, as the uncertainty surrounding these incidents includes the duration of involvement and the recurrence of the incident while on the scene (Paton, 2006). Officers could arrive at a call of a person threatening others with a firearm to find the offender no longer on the scene, and only a report is needed. However, the offender could then return while officers are on the scene, renewing the dangerous threat within the same incident. Law enforcement response to these critical incidents can be life-or-death situations for the officers, offenders, and the community members involved (Arble et al., 2019). In the previous example, the safety of those involved is greatly impacted by the officer's response as well as the response of the offender in possession of the firearm. In situations

such as this that suddenly become extreme, officers are required to make difficult decisions under time constraints and uncertain conditions, all while they are reacting under stress (Huhta et al., 2021).

Critical incidents can be suddenly unexpected as the individual attempts to cope with the event that surpasses their coping abilities (Melander et al., 2024). Officers can work their shift in anticipation, unsure if they will experience a stressful encounter or how dangerous an incident may become when they respond. These incidents can threaten officers' physical well-being at any time during their shift and can expose them to stressors beyond that of normal human experience (Anderson et al., 2002). This stress is further evident in a study that was conducted using heart rate monitors with law enforcement officers. The study found that officers had elevated heart rates at the beginning of their shifts that slowly declined throughout their shift but remained slightly elevated even at the end, except for critical incidents during their shift when their heart rates spiked at the time of the incident (Anderson et al., 2002). These elevated heart rates are evidence of not only the stress but also the anticipatory stress officers can experience throughout their entire shift and while engaging in critical incidents.

When law enforcement is not responding to critical incidents, they are also responsible for non-violent calls for service, such as simple parking enforcement, premise or permit checks, traffic control, community engagement, and more. These responsibilities may not seem dangerous; however, due to the nature of law enforcement work, officers must practice being in a constant state of awareness. Situational awareness is a crucial skill required by law enforcement as they visually scan unique environments

to inform their decisions, actions, and effective judgments (Huhta et al., 2022). Any situation can go from a peaceful and happy event to a dangerous incident that requires law enforcement action.

Consider the following incidents that have occurred in the last few years: the Kansas City parade shooting (2024), the Monterey Park Shooting (2023), and the Highland Park parade shooting (2022). These tragic incidents all began as celebratory events that turned violent in a split second. In a study conducted with Swedish law enforcement officers, the officers described the desire for preparedness for what could happen, and depending on the circumstances, planning how they could act to not be caught off guard (Hansson & Borglund, 2024). Law enforcement officers must remain vigilant, even during non-violent responses, including community engagements, because past critical incidents have demonstrated that these non-violent events can turn into critical incidents in the blink of an eye.

Psychological Changes

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

The roles law enforcement officers must carry out are accompanied by an emotional price tag as they are witnesses to horrific atrocities, such as experiences involving violence, trauma, and even mass casualties (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). As part of the occupation, law enforcement officers are exposed not only to such critical incidents but also to exposure, which is a normal aspect of their careers (Papazoglou & Tuttle, 2018). This long-term exposure to critical incidents throughout law enforcement careers has been shown to have negative implications on their physical and psychological

well-being (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). Further research has found that the repeated stress exposure involved in policing is a significant risk factor for the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and burnout (Anders et al., 2022).

Law enforcement officers are at risk of developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as they are exposed to traumatic experiences regularly, which can impact their health and well-being. PTSD can be described as the clustering of problematic mental health symptoms that impair functioning and impact the overall quality of life (Baker et al., 2024). As these impairments and symptoms of PTSD manifest in law enforcement officers, they can begin to inhibit the officers' ability to carry out the essential duties they are responsible for. Law enforcement work can often be urgent, with little to no room for the symptoms of PTSD to impair officer response or interfere with functioning (Imhoff-Smith & Grupe, 2023). Due to the nature of law enforcement work, trauma can be unavoidable, and the possibility of PTSD manifesting in law enforcement officers does occur, making it necessary to monitor and research ways to help officers in this area.

The exposure to traumatic events and PTSD symptoms in law enforcement officers has been shown to have a significant relationship with the years of service in law enforcement that an officer has worked (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). Law enforcement officers are exposed to a career-long range of critical incidents involving stress and trauma. Prolonged exposure to stress can eventually cause performance systems to deteriorate, resulting in adaptation failure that can cause issues in behavioral and even physiological responses (Radley & Herman, 2023). The repeated exposure to stress and

trauma that officers experience, especially that which leads to PTSD, can lead to the dysregulation of the natural physiological state.

Living with PTSD and long-term stress can have negative and even detrimental impacts on life and the decision-making abilities of law enforcement officers. PTSD is connected with numerous chronic illnesses and even premature mortality (Reed et al., 2022). The physiological changes that are activated in response to stress and trauma can impact everyday activities and long-term physical and mental well-being as officers are repeatedly exposed to stressors. An example of this would be the chronic and repeated activation of the HPA axis, which can lead to inflammation, oxygen-related issues, and aging factors (Reed et al., 2022). The physiological changes that come from stress and trauma, such as critical incidents, can impact law enforcement officers not only in the critical moments but also well after them in the future. A study with law enforcement officers demonstrated that personality factors and coping strategies were significantly associated with the presence and severity of PTSD and burnout (Anders et al., 2022). Every officer makes decisions on how to handle the stress experienced at work, and these decisions can influence their current and future well-being.

Studies have found that higher frequencies of these critical incidents are risk factors for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), with the severity of the incidents playing a major role as well (Díaz-Tamayo et al., 2024; Melander et al., 2024; Weiss et al., 2010). The stress of regularly engaging in critical incidents with clear and present danger, being unable to back down until it is resolved, and not knowing what the resolution will be can make officers vulnerable to developing psychological post-incident

complications. A study conducted with law enforcement patrol officers found that the prevalence of PTSD in the participants was 7%, with 62% showing sub-threshold symptoms of PTSD (Isabirye et al., 2022). This supports similar findings of an older study conducted on Dutch law enforcement officers that showed 34% of officer participants suffered from post-traumatic stress symptoms, while 7% met full diagnostic criteria after experiencing critical incidents (Maguen et al., 2009). These studies demonstrate how the stress of critical incidents can have numerous effects on officers who are experiencing them and how these effects can follow into their personal lives, as the symptoms do not go away simply because they go home.

Other Psychological Impacts

Along with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression is also associated with the physical and psychological effects that law enforcement officers experience during stressful incidents in their careers (Allison et al., 2019). Depression can be particularly alarming for officers to experience because of its close relationship to suicidal ideation. Suicide has been shown to closely follow depression, and law enforcement officers experiencing atrocious events can struggle with depression (Bishopp et al., 2018). A study conducted with law enforcement officers following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Centers revealed a strong link between depression and suicidal ideation in law enforcement officers (Violanti et al., 2006). Suicide is a permanent decision regarding depression, and with both being found to be associated with each other in law enforcement officers, it becomes crucial to monitor these behaviors in officers regarding critical incidents.

Anxiety is another psychological impact of the stress and trauma law enforcement officers experience throughout their shifts and careers. Officers can experience an elevated likelihood of anxiety due to factors such as increased vulnerability and uncertainty surrounding situations (Roach et al., 2024). In the experience of stress related to the occupation, officers can anticipate tragic situations waiting for them or scenarios that may scare them based on previous experiences. A study conducted with law enforcement officers demonstrated that 24.3% of the population sample showed yellow flags for anxiety, and 19.21% showed red flags (Gullon-Scott & Longstaff, 2022). After experiencing traumatic incidents, there can be a re-lived fear while thinking of the memories and an introduced fear of re-experiencing something similar in the future.

Law Enforcement Suicide

Suicide among law enforcement officers is not uncommon, as many officers decide to end their lives prematurely every year. Suicide among public safety workers is a public health crisis that affects the safety of everyone (Dockstader & Lawrence, 2024). When law enforcement officers experience trauma and stress from critical incidents, they may need help processing these incidents afterward. Law enforcement officers are sometimes referred to as the *helpers*, and sometimes the *helpers* need *help*. This help can be met with resistance from law enforcement officers, making it necessary for facilitators to find a way of getting through (Dixon, 2021). As uncomfortable as it may be to talk through the stress that officers face during traumatic incidents, it can be necessary to provide them with the psychological help they need to live through another day.

The occupation of law enforcement poses a unique risk for self-harm and even suicide, with all the trauma they experience. A study was conducted that collected millions of death certificates that showed that law enforcement officers were 54% more likely than other decedents to die by suicide (Violanti & Steege, 2021). This study highlights the importance of the unique difficulties officers face as opposed to those of the general public. There can be severe consequences for not tending to the stress and trauma from critical incidents that can brew inside officers and result in unwanted outcomes. Poorly managed mental occupational stress can have mental health consequences, including serious conditions such as burnout, depression, and even hopelessness (Civilotti et al., 2022). The stress from critical incidents can have lasting and even permanent physical and psychological impacts on the lives of officers, which can even include death.

Stress and Law Enforcement Misconduct

While the stress of critical incidents can cause inward psychological impacts on officers, it may also cause outward psychological impacts. Research has demonstrated that law enforcement misconduct can stem from the occupational stressors they experience (Bishopp et al., 2020; Lawson et al., 2021). Just like every other human, officers have a basket of emotions they collect, and when this basket gets full, or a particular experience does not sit well in it, this can contribute to unwanted responses that may not be normal. In response, the collective negative emotions can increase officers' likelihood of engaging in maladaptive coping behaviors and can play an important role in law enforcement misconduct (Bishopp et al., 2020). When considering the importance of

decision-making during critical incidents, it is crucial to consider the emotional aspect and comfort of the officers responding to them.

The stress law enforcement officers experience when they respond to critical incidents can manifest within them and lead them to make decisions they may not have made without the impact of the stress. When law enforcement officers are exposed to stressful and traumatic incidents, the strains that accompany them can increase the risk of negative emotions in officers, increasing the likelihood of misconduct or deviant behavior as well (Bishopp et al., 2020). With these negative and sometimes permanent outcomes, the importance of understanding the stressful impacts of critical incidents on law enforcement officers becomes imperative.

Physiological Changes

Stress as a Source of Physiological Change

Critical incidents are unpredictable, involve pressures and potential dangers, and can sometimes be uncontrollable, placing stress on the law enforcement officers required to respond (Stenshol et al., 2023). These incidents can require a great deal of resources from officers as they attempt to handle the critical incident unfolding before them. The demands placed on law enforcement officers during these critical incidents devour their mental and physical resources, resulting in physiological reactions that affect them due to resource depletion (Chen & Wu, 2022). Not only are officers experiencing external stress during these critical incidents, but they are also experiencing reactions occurring within them as their bodies are functioning outside their normal range.

When law enforcement officers experience stress, their body's operating system automatically responds in an attempt to protect them from the stressor and return itself to a normal state of homeostasis. The stress response in the body is adaptive as the organism enables itself to cope with the stressor and restore itself to a state of homeostasis (Haykin & Rolls, 2021). These responses are a natural attempt by the body to operate amid the stressors based on the factors surrounding the incident. Depending on the stressor, the response will fluctuate based on factors surrounding the incident, including but not limited to the intensity, nature, and duration (Arble et al., 2019). Each of these physiological responses by the body can occur during critical incidents as officers are faced with stressors that threaten their physical and psychological well-being.

Stress creates physiological changes in officers before stressors even emerge, without them consciously thinking about it. These physiological changes occur in law enforcement officers in anticipation of the critical incidents and stressors they may encounter while working (Anderson et al., 2019; Arble et al., 2019; Baldwin et al., 2019). In anticipation, the physiological changes that come about from stress can even occur as officers prepare for the unknown encounters they are about to have. Studies have demonstrated the physiological changes in light of stress that officers experience during perceived stress and critical incidents (Giessing et al., 2020), and even in the anticipating moments leading up to the stressor (Anderson et al., 2019). While officers are processing the information already received and planning how they will approach the situation, the physiological changes are already at work. Some findings suggest that past trauma may be a factor in the physiological responses to new stressors (Arble et al., 2019). When

officers experience critical incidents, all the previous critical moments shape their response to the newly presented one.

System Responses to Physiological Changes

When experiencing stress, the brain plays an especially important role as the source and regulator of these stress responses. The brain initiates the stress response as it collects all the information from the sensory inputs and integrates them into a response with a plan to cope with the challenges that have disrupted homeostasis (Haykin & Rolls, 2021). During critical incidents, the brain adjusts attention and movement instinctively based on the situation to accomplish small goals surrounding the stressor (Huhta et al., 2021). Survival instincts are included in these small goals that emerge during critical incidents as the brain reacts based on what it determines the body needs to survive the stressor. This physiological stress response leans toward more implicit skills as it reduces the deliberate and conscious decision-making skills of the brain (Huhta et al., 2021). During critical incidents, the brain naturally responds rapidly to the stressor rather than consciously thinking about long-term goals and planning that require additional time.

The cardiovascular system is important to the adequate functioning of all systems in the body for law enforcement officers experiencing stress during critical incidents. During the stress-induced activation of the autonomic nervous system, the heart rate immediately increases, and the heart rate variability decreases to improve physiological arousal for the stressor (Jiryis et al., 2022). As the heart pumps blood around the body, it plays a key role not only in circulation and regulation but also in aiding the body's ability to survive a threat. Cardiac output is directly proportionate to the body's needs during

times of physiological stress and will increase to ensure adequate tissue function (King & Lowery, 2023). Breathwork, particularly slow-paced breathing, has been shown to have reliable short-term improvements in these cardiovascular functions and even some reduction in negative emotions (Shao et al., 2024). The heart is a vital organ that continuously operates to sustain function and help the body respond to external stimuli.

To determine how the heart functions in law enforcement officers during critical incidents, a study was conducted with law enforcement officers wearing heart rate monitors during their tours of duty. The study showed that officers experienced anticipatory stress while going about their tours of duty, with the highest heart rates occurring just before and during critical incidents (Anderson et al., 2002). Officers receive information about critical incidents as they are dispatched, and the reception of this information can already begin the physiological effects before they even arrive on the scene. The study further found that officers' heart rates were more elevated at the beginning of their tours of duty, spiking with critical incidents and slowly decreasing throughout their tours of duty (Anderson et al., 2002). This study demonstrates the physiological responses from the anticipatory stress officers experience during their tours of duty from the moment they put their uniforms on.

Another physiological response to critical incidents includes elevated cortisol levels in law enforcement officers as they respond to stress and critical incidents throughout their tours of duty. A study was done with law enforcement officers that showed their cortisol levels were steadily higher throughout the day than those of the general population (Planche et al., 2019). While cortisol is already steadily higher in law

enforcement officers, there are still peaks or dips in cortisol that occur when officers encounter critical incidents. High levels of cortisol are released from the pituitary-adrenocortical axis immediately following the stressors, peaking between twenty and thirty minutes after encountering the stressor and staying elevated for approximately an hour after the critical incident (Arble et al., 2019). Cortisol is released in response to stressors as it stimulates protein breakdown and is used to produce glucose and amino acids for tissue repair in case of injury (Anderson et al., 2002). These physiological changes are rapidly done without officers even thinking about them as their body's natural way of protecting itself and surviving.

Impact of Physiological Changes

Critical incidents are sudden and can overwhelm officers' normal coping mechanisms through rapid increases in catecholamines, physiological arousal, alertness, and enhanced memory (Anderson et al., 2002). Each of these physiological changes impacts law enforcement officers when they are responding to critical incidents. A study done with military members found that emotions, including fear, were associated with increased tremor severity and decreased tremor frequency (Tomczak et al., 2014). When under stress, the physiological changes, including adrenaline levels, begin rising in the body, which can impact the steadiness of law enforcement officers during critical incidents. The tremor frequency may decrease due to muscle stiffness, while the severity can increase with irregularities in the muscles and because of physical effort (Tomczak et al., 2014). During critical incidents, the physiological changes in response to stress can

cause law enforcement officers to experience tremors or shakiness in the crucial moments when they must remain steady.

The overload of physiological responses can be both positive and negative as officers navigate a response to the stressors faced in critical incidents. The stress response is adaptive in attempts to prepare the body to manage the obstacles presented by environmental change (Chu et al., 2024). Officers can feel and be aware of these physiological changes, but there are also changes that they will be consciously unaware of happening. Officers can feel their heart rate speeding up and beating particularly strongly. During critical incidents, officers' heart rates are elevated, dropping upon conclusion and recovery (Violanti et al., 2017). This occurs as adrenaline is released into their bodies in preparation for fight, flight, or freeze as stressors are presented.

Officers are constantly on alert and ready for the next call assignment or watching for things that could occur right in front of them. When under stress, the heart rate can increase, the body releases hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol that act as messengers, and blood vessels directly related to the affected portions of the body begin dilating so more blood flows through these areas (Shaw et al., 2024). While the body does these reactions naturally, officers can begin to feel the changes occurring in them, with each officer being unique in their experiences. Some officers may feel shakiness, a heartbeat more defined, uncertainty, and more as they approach critical incidents and experience the stressors that present. The different circumstances and characteristics of critical incidents can often exacerbate officers' perceptions of uncertainty (May et al.,

2023). The combination of stress and danger with unknown outcomes can affect the body in many different ways in the midst of responding under pressure to incidents.

One of the main components of being a law enforcement officer is protecting and serving, which requires regularly carrying a firearm. Given that law enforcement officers are entrusted with the tremendous responsibility of having to use firearms when reasonable and necessary, the impacts of physiological changes under stress are an important consideration. Studies have shown that the physiological effects of anxiety and stress have been shown to impact law enforcement shooting accuracy (Giessing et al., 2019; Simas et al., 2022). During critical incidents, law enforcement officers may need to use their firearms while being impacted by physiological stress responses.

Memory can also be impacted by physiological changes that occur in law enforcement officers during critical incidents. In high-stress environments such as critical incidents, both officer perceptions and memory recall can be impacted (Roscoe et al., 2024). Law enforcement officers must rely on their perceptions during critical incidents to evaluate threats and the safety of those involved. When they act, they must do so according to the laws and regulations of their departments, which requires remembering what they have been trained on and taught. A study with Australian law enforcement officers found that the participants who were in a stressed state of arousal had more accurate memory recall than non-stressed participants (Roscoe et al., 2024). Officers must remember everything they have been taught, but they also must remember what occurs during critical incidents for legal and record purposes. The potential impacts of

psychological changes on officers under stress can both assist and complicate officer responses to critical incidents.

Perceptions and awareness are particularly important as law enforcement officers evaluate potential threats and consider the safety of all those involved. During training, it is beneficial for officers to learn how to recognize and regulate their emotions and physiological state while recognizing task-relevant information to make informed decisions (O'Hare & Beer, 2020). Law enforcement officers must be trained to understand the stress responses of their bodies to make informed decisions under pressure. Since the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act of 2017, departments that have implemented comprehensive approaches to officer mental health have reported a decline in the negative impacts of job-related stressors (Craddock & Telesco, 2022). Emotional and physiological regulation play a key role in the perceptions and awareness of law enforcement officers at work and during critical incidents.

Functionality

Functionality Under Stress

During critical incidents, law enforcement officers must function amid the dangers and the physical, physiological, and behavioral reactions to stress occurring within themselves to restore and maintain safety in communities. This can be difficult as decision-making can be influenced by officers' capabilities to recognize and respond to threats, which can be affected by behavioral and cognitive processes that are caused by stress (Murray et al., 2024). When officers are responding to critical incidents, the decisions they make can be difficult, as their bodies are reacting due to the stress and the

pressures of people who are relying on them. During critical incidents, people look to law enforcement for help, and with this comes a challenge for officers to make the correct decisions even in critical incidents (Stenshol et al., 2023). How law enforcement officers operate during critical incidents plays a major role in the resolution of the incident and the safety of everyone involved.

When a stress response is initiated in the brain, it can be described as a nonselective response that attempts to reorient the cognitive and physiological capacities to return the body to homeostasis (Anderson et al., 2019). For law enforcement officers during this nonselective response, they must train to function intentionally as they attempt to resolve the critical incident under stress. Officers must select a decision, knowing that different choices can lead to different outcomes, all in a small amount of time and under situational pressure (Stenshol et al., 2023). Research has shown that experience and training can lead to officers making more effective, efficient, and accurate decisions in critical incidents (Stenshol et al., 2023); this highlights the importance of law enforcement training and prior experience in helping officers function in critical incidents (Paton, 2006). Through training and a variety of experiences, officers can learn to function and make deliberate decisions in critical incidents while building a resource library of their own for the future.

Officers must be intentional in their actions during critical incident response, from mental focus to breath work in maintaining coordination (Keesman, 2021). Breathwork is related to brain regulation, thought, and emotion, with slowing breathing helping to synchronize brain waves and ultimately helping the different brain regions more

effectively (Fincham et al., 2023). A study conducted with law enforcement cadets demonstrated the necessity for regulated breathing, specifically in maintaining accurate gaze alignment and body composure (Keesman, 2021). During critical incidents, officers must be intentional in their decisions not only to external threats but also to the responses occurring within their bodies, including breathing properly.

Law enforcement officers must also be aware of the surrounding occurrences, such as what offenders and victims are saying to responding officers, and fight against the auditory exclusion that can occur. Auditory exclusion refers to a stress-induced state where the brain excludes a certain auditory stimulus, resulting in temporary or selective hearing loss (Stenshol et al., 2023). During critical incidents, officers can experience a sensory overload under the stress of everything around them. This cognitive overload in law enforcement officers can affect both their visual processing and auditory processing amid critical incidents (Stenshol et al., 2023). A study conducted by Roberts and Cole (2018) found that during sensory overloads, officers relied more on visual senses than auditory. Law enforcement officers must still manage critical incidents to the best of their abilities, regardless of auditory and visual challenges, including sensory overload. While officers are attempting to manage scenes amid sensory overload, they must find the safest resolutions for everyone involved, as they are also watched by others involved and those curious about the outcomes.

Coordination and Control

Law enforcement response to critical incidents mirrors many of the same attributes and responsibilities as their regular everyday activities to serve and protect

members of the community. Critical incidents simply magnify the scale and coordination of these everyday activities. During emergencies, emergency personnel must quickly engage and coordinate responses with other personnel to accomplish separate but related objectives within a framework of goals to reduce the harm occurring (Brown et al., 2021). Officers gather information and learn additional details as they go through the critical incident. With this information, they must effectively coordinate within and outside their law enforcement agency for a successful conclusion to the incident. Emergency personnel respond while the incident is occurring and initiate recovery efforts with the help of other emergency personnel, including agencies in various parts of the site, through collaborative communication and coordination (Brown et al., 2021). Critical incidents, by nature, can be chaotic and stressful, and with bodies reacting under this stress, they can make coordinating information difficult for responding officers. Regardless of these physiological reactions, valuable time is lost when the information gathered is not disseminated and coordinated during critical incidents.

Communication during critical incidents by law enforcement officers with others, including other officers, is key to a successful outcome (Hine & Bragias, 2021). Law enforcement officers are considered first responders because they are part of the few professionals immediately called to emergency scenes. A study conducted by Ricciardelli et al. (2020) on public safety personnel revealed that arriving on the scene to experience and be involved in the trauma may be interpreted by responders as more traumatic than arriving on the scene later. Despite being part of the select few first people to arrive on stressful and chaotic scenes, it is crucial for the officers to still focus on the dissemination

of the initial information they gather. Law enforcement officers must communicate important information during the unfolding of events, which can be complicated due to the dynamics of the incident and the complexity of the decisions being made by officers (Hine & Bragias, 2021).

Officers could arrive on the scene of a person shot, but the victim is a street block over from the address given, the family and friends are contaminating the crime scene, and the offender has just left the scene. Officers must coordinate with additional responding units by communicating information they are gathering on the scene so additional resources, including other responding units and medical personnel, can maximize their response efforts. In major critical incidents, there can be multiple outside agency personnel responding whom officers must coordinate with for the successful conclusion of the incident (Hine & Bragias, 2021). In such a scenario, if the victim is severely wounded, their life could depend on the few minutes saved by officers updating dispatch with the correct address so medical personnel know where to go. Additionally, coordinating with other responding units could result in the successful apprehension of the offender and help protect the crime scene.

Law enforcement officers play many vital roles in critical incidents, and these roles involve the management and control of themselves and others involved. Officers must establish and maintain managed control of things ranging from traffic to scene access, protecting buildings, preventing destruction, and rendering aid all simultaneously (Hine & Bragias, 2021). With these numerous elements in critical incidents and the expectation for officers to maintain control, officer attention is divided between many

moving pieces. Harris et al. (2017) found that under stress in critical incidents, officers will focus their attention on problem-solving as opposed to acting on feelings when making these decisions. Officers can have a lot of problems to solve under stress during critical incidents with little time, making it important for them to remain aware and in control of themselves to best coordinate with everyone else.

Regardless of everything happening around them and the physiological reactions their bodies are undergoing, law enforcement officers must remain in control during critical incidents. Critical incidents require officers to go beyond what they are accustomed to, to control the cause of the incident and protect all those involved (Hine & Bragias, 2021). Along with controlling the scene, officers must also practice making conscious and deliberate decisions. In a study conducted with law enforcement students in critical incident simulations, many of the participants reported feeling a certain loss of control of their mental capacity, including the area of attention or focus (Stenshol et al., 2023). Control during critical incidents for law enforcement officers can be difficult due to chaos and physiological changes occurring in them, but it is crucial to gain control of the scene and the cause of the incident for a safe conclusion.

Impact on Critical Incidents

Officer performance is affected by physiological arousal during critical incidents, including decision-making and real-world performance (Arble et al., 2019). The way law enforcement officers respond during critical incidents is crucial, as officers hold the responsibility of controlling the incident for safety. While responding, the physiological changes can actively impact the decision-making process for law enforcement officers as

well as other areas, such as perception and information processing (Stenshol et al., 2023). The time officers have to process the events unfolding before them is short and requires immediate responses, sometimes even requiring reactions rather than well-thought-out plans. Amid these time restrictions, officers must control their physiological responses to respond effectively and safely to critical incidents.

Due to human involvement in critical incidents, such as officers, other first responders, victims, offenders, and more, there will always be numerous moving factors surrounding critical incidents that officers must navigate. The physiological changes surrounding activation can occur in more than one way, depending on how the body interprets the stressors. Challenge-like physiological responses can be beneficial for the body, navigating applicable resources to the different parts of the body (Behnke & Kaczmarek, 2018). A friendly challenge, such as a game, can result in excitement in which the body prepares to act accordingly. An example of this may be a promotional exam that officers are challenged with, having to exhibit their skills and abilities before their superiors. When challenges present, cognitive evaluations of the self and environment are initiated to determine the physiological resources needed (Behnke & Kaczmarek, 2018). While these challenging responses can be beneficial, threat-like physiological patterns can be detrimental to the mobilization of energy and needed resources (Kelley et al., 2019). Critical incidents activate the threat-like physiological responses in the body as law enforcement officers confront stressors and restore peace and safety.

Law Enforcement Officer Support

Community Trust in Law Enforcement

Effective policing is the art of balancing both law enforcement and community needs to maintain safety and fairness to those involved. When the community views law enforcement as legitimate, they are more likely to cooperate and trust the officers they are interacting with (Maguire et al., 2023). Trust and cooperation are two responses that law enforcement should seek as they attempt to restore peace and safety during critical incidents. When communities lose trust in law enforcement, officers can be put in more danger and make their lives more stressful, as the community does not perceive officers as trying to help (Bush & Matthews, 2024). In recent reforms, some departments have begun focusing on procedural justice models to train officers in the art of trustful persuasion to gain willing cooperation (Maguire et al., 2023). Community policing models have also recently been focused on emphasizing the importance of community-law enforcement relationships.

Following the aftermath of some violent law enforcement encounters with citizens, such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, policing has come under public scrutiny (Stinson et al., 2021). Law enforcement officers' words are challenged as clashes between the law enforcement and the public occur, with each involved person having a perception of the events that occurred. More recently, much funding has been allotted for cameras to record law enforcement interactions with the public, recording actual events as they occur so that others can see them with their own eyes (Salerno & Sanchez, 2020). These video recordings have changed the dynamic of policing as legitimacy is

highlighted in both law enforcement and community capacities. When officers practice law enforcement legitimacy, communities can have more confidence that authorities are concerned with the well-being of the community and are being respectful and honest during their interactions (Nam & Melde, 2024). The trust communities have in their law enforcement officers affects the cooperation and willingness to comply when critical incidents arise.

Law Enforcement Trust in the Community

Just as the trust communities place in law enforcement is important, law enforcement's trust toward the community is likewise important. A study conducted on law enforcement officers in New Jersey showed that officers' trust in the community was independent of each officer with their own general and specific conceptualized ideas (Bonnan-White et al., 2022). Officers are human, just like everyone else around them, each with their own past experiences and thought processes toward others and the community during calls for service. Professional stressors and mental health outcomes have been shown to have correlations, and it may be reasonable that these factors could also impact how officers view the relationships they have with the community they serve (Bonnan-White et al., 2022). Every interaction officers have with citizens could have the potential to impact the trust they place in the community.

In larger metropolitan cities, officers within the same department can have vastly different experiences with citizens. Each of these interactions with citizens can add to the shaping of officer trust in communities, with officers seeing the good and the bad of people during service calls and interactions. Trust in the community during critical

incidents is associated with the frequency of fulfilled feelings and knowledge of community cultural patterns (Bonnan-White et al., 2022). A review of studies done on law enforcement and community members highlighted things such as procedural justice and law enforcement demonstrating the desire for community input as being associated with community trust and cooperation with law enforcement (O'Brien & Tyler, 2019). Law enforcement trust and engagement in the community play a crucial role in the everyday interactions and wellness of the officers, as well as how officers attempt to gain community cooperation during critical incidents.

Law Enforcement Trust Among Each Other

The trust between the community and law enforcement is important, and the trust among law enforcement officers and agencies working together is also important. Coworker trust among law enforcement officers is significant regarding the stress officers experience at work (Lambert et al., 2022). Law enforcement officers have a unique responsibility to respond to critical incidents regardless of the dangers presented during this response. With the many factors surrounding critical incidents, the relationships within law enforcement agencies build trust between law enforcement officers who are responding to and interacting in critical incidents with each other (Hine & Bragias, 2021). Critical moments can create a sense of dependency as law enforcement officers rely on each other to provide haste backup and help restore peace when every moment matters. When officers call for backup in mentally stressful and dangerous situations, their coworkers will respond to assist. A study done with mental health workers showed that the participants described a strong sense of camaraderie and peer support in colleagues

who could relate to their experiences and understand the unique demands of the job (Billings et al., 2021).

The law enforcement atmosphere can require backup amid dangerous situations that are not only frightening but also life-threatening. This response is not a typical need help request. It can be a response that costs one or more officers their lives. On November 19, 2018, Chicago Police Officer Samuel Jimenez responded to other officers requesting immediate backup at Mercy Hospital for an active shooter incident. Upon arrival, Officer Jimenez, with the knowledge that his fellow officers had already been fired upon and that the gunman was still actively shooting, bravely entered the hospital and was fatally shot by the gunman. Chicago Police Officer Samuel Jimenez gave his life after responding to his fellow law enforcement officers' request for backup. Law enforcement officers trust and depend on one another to respond hastily and provide help during critical incidents, even when their lives are at risk. Officers work in collaboration with each other in partnerships and teams, providing an ability to anticipate the needs of one another through shared knowledge of responsibilities in proper action and information (Espevik et al., 2021).

Critical incidents such as the Mercy Hospital shooting in Chicago demonstrate the exigent circumstances that can emerge throughout the policing profession. Trust among officers is unique to them and their profession due to the dangerous experiences and knowledge they share (Bonnan-White et al., 2022; Foley & Massey, 2019). The referenced Mercy Hospital shooting incident exemplifies the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding for backup, being outside the nature of a non-

police occupation. Trust and effective communication in policing are built naturally in officers through training and the ability to respond to critical incidents (Hine & Bragias, 2021). The relationship between partners and colleagues built among law enforcement officers is unique to the critical incidents they experience together.

Communication Post-Incident

Communication in policing is an essential part of officer duties as they interact with those around them in the community and with each other. It is estimated that 98% of law enforcement work involves communication with others, including the community (Oxholm & Glaser, 2023). Within this communication, intercommunication among officers is inevitable as they navigate through situations, including critical incidents. Studies have shown that communication between law enforcement officers regarding their experience of critical incidents is something important they share (Hine & Bragias, 2021). Officers often witness situations outside the normal human experience with trauma and stress during critical incidents.

During critical incidents, communication is important in the coordination and cooperation that officers strive to gain as they attempt to restore peace and safety. Officers must attempt to communicate with offenders and others involved in the incident and maintain radio communication effectively in the face of danger (Arble et al., 2019). Communication impacts law enforcement response as officers on the scene must effectively communicate with other officers on the scene while communicating essential information with officers responding to assist as well. Intergroup communication plays an essentially impactful role that is central to policing, as officers must interact with other

officers as well as the community (Oxholm & Glaser, 2023). With policing comes a unique language that law enforcement officers communicate with, which can be difficult for those outside the occupation to understand.

Peer Understanding

Due to the significant mental and physical violence law enforcement officers are exposed to, they can be particularly vulnerable to psychological distress and trauma (Ryu & Lee, 2025). Law enforcement personnel are often looked to for help in difficult times, and uncertainty can influence their willingness to ask for help in return. A study done with law enforcement officers throughout the United States revealed that 90% of participants perceived stigma as a negative influencer of help-seeking behavior (Drew & Martin, 2021). Stigma stemming from oneself and those around them can become barriers as officers are unsure of how their request will come across to others. In addition to the stigma surrounding mental health, other obstacles for officers requesting needed assistance can include the worry of being perceived as weak and feeling uncomfortable during the process (Ryu & Lee, 2025). Switching roles from helper to helped can be difficult, but officers must receive the mental health help needed.

Peers can be in a helpful position to assist other officers due to their intimate understanding of the job demands and experiences different from those outside the profession (Grupe, 2023; Uhl et al., 2023). Law enforcement partners and colleagues not only share horrific experiences, but they also share the knowledge they gather, which can establish a unique bond between them. One study with law enforcement employees demonstrated that the participants reported greater interest in seeking familial and peer

support over mental health professionals (Grupe, 2023). One's peers can be particularly helpful in normalizing stressful experiences and reducing help-seeking stigmas through understanding and supportive settings (Grupe, 2023). Peer understanding is the baseline to establish meaningful connections that provide support for normalizing communication between officers after experiencing horrific situations.

Law enforcement officers respond to gruesome calls, including shootings, stabbings, child abuse, and more, that are outside the typical normalcy of the general population. Each of these incidents is collected into the memories of each officer and becomes part of an officer's portfolio of stressful and traumatic experiences. A study conducted with law enforcement officers enrolled in the Buffalo Cardio-Metabolic Occupational Law Enforcement Stress Study found that the officers reported the highest stressful incidents as exposure to battered or dead children, killing someone in the line of duty, fellow officers killed in the line of duty, situations requiring the use of force, and physical attack on themselves (Violanti et al., 2016). In addition, many of these five most stressful incidents, as reported by the officers, do not require leave but require officers to carry on their duties as normal unless exigent circumstances cause a department to place the officer on leave. While reporting these incidents as the most stressful incidents, they were accompanied by a prevalence of 0.3% to 58.5% in the preceding month of the study, with killing someone in the line of duty as the least prevalent and use of force as the most (Violanti et al., 2016). In this referenced study, the use of force events was reported as one of the most stressful incidents officers experienced, with a high prevalence in the preceding month, which exemplifies the non-stop nature of law enforcement work.

Officers must continue moving forward with their shifts and work lives, regardless of experiencing high-stress incidents (Jetelina et al., 2020).

Aside from stressful incidents, there can also be overall stressors that exist in law enforcement work and law enforcement departments that officers experience together. In the same study conducted by Violanti et al. (2016), the law enforcement officers reported the top stressors in their occupation in the preceding month as dealing with family disputes and crisis incidents, responding to in-progress felonies, fellow officers not doing their job, making critical on-the-spot decisions, and not having sufficient manpower to adequately handle a job. 77% to 83% of the officers in the study reported experiencing these stressors at least once in the month preceding the study (Violanti et al., 2016). This study not only analyses the top stressors and stressful incidents but also highlights the frequency with which officers experience them as well. It is also well-known that the work involved with the law enforcement profession remains stressful even when officers are not being exposed to traumatic incidents (Burns & Buchanan, 2020). The experiences of stressful incidents, as well as the everyday law enforcement asks and knowledge gathered by law enforcement officers, are unique experiences that they share an understanding of together, making law enforcement peers a great resource for helping other officers.

Peer Support

Peer support can be an effective means of providing support to law enforcement officers from other officers who bring a mutual understanding after experiencing critical incidents. One study on peer support found that officers were more likely to reach out to

other peers regarding issues they were experiencing rather than self-reporting (Quick, 2023). Critical incidents can be traumatic, and officers can feel comfortable reaching out to their peers to help process what happened in the critical moments. Following critical incidents, the type of peer support that officers receive can impact the response they have to the trauma experienced (Donovan, 2022). The interaction between officers during critical incidents provides the opportunity for peer support to help officers 'well-being post incidents.

Peer support can exist in two different settings: formal settings, in which specific training is involved, and informal settings, in which interactions are more relaxed. In a formal peer support setting, members receive training and supervision on providing mental health assistance to their peers (Donovan, 2022). This type of setting will contain a more structured approach with procedures followed in their response. The training received in peer support programs better equips them with relevant skills to develop and reflect on best practices (Ward & Belkin, 2024). Following critical incidents, formal peer support can provide valuable debriefing opportunities for law enforcement officers.

Informal peer support also exists in which law enforcement officers confide in their peers in a more relaxed setting. Informal support can appeal to officers due to potential fears of repercussions or embarrassment in the workplace in which the officer works (Ward & Belkin, 2024). The camaraderie between officers is important in peer conversations, as well as mutual understanding of the subject matter. Findings suggest that officers show a preference for peer support in an informal setting over a formal setting (Donovan, 2022). Informal peer support can occur after critical incidents between

officers, simply communicating with each other regarding the incident and what took place.

Law enforcement officers are not always the easiest occupational population to help or ask for help, as they are accustomed to being those who provide help instead of needing it. Law enforcement officers work in an environment that can promote an atmosphere of self-resilience and the ability to cope with critical incidents without the need for support (Porter & Lee, 2024). This highlights the importance of peer support, as officers may feel more comfortable talking about trauma and their experiences. Peer support can serve as an avenue for encouraging well-being among law enforcement officers and healing from trauma (Ward & Belkin, 2024). Peer support provides such a unique and beneficial avenue, highlighting the importance of law enforcement-colleague interaction during and after critical incidents (Fallon et al., 2023) and furthering the need to focus on partners during critical incidents.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter provided valuable insight into law enforcement officers' challenges while responding to critical incidents. The stress and trauma involved in law enforcement work are undoubtedly unique, as officers experience the unique demands of the occupation (Billings et al., 2021). Limited information is available to officers while en route to scenes, and they work quickly to understand what is occurring to provide applicable services. Officers face both physical and mental dangers in the stressful calls they are dispatched to, as the unpredictability of the situation raises questions as to whether they will survive their shift. This stress that emanates from critical incidents can

impact the law enforcement officers involved and their experiences (Arble et al., 2019; Baldwin et al., 2019). In the long-term outcomes, the stress and repeated exposure to critical incidents can impact officers' mental health and well-being, as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and more can develop after the experience of traumatic events (Díaz-Tamayo et al., 2024).

In reaction to stressful encounters, physiological changes occur within the body that can impact the function and control of officers. While experiencing behavioral and cognitive processing caused by stress, officers' function, including decision-making, can be influenced by officers' capabilities to respond to threats (Murray et al., 2024). Regardless, officers must communicate information and findings to other officers and agencies in an attempt to ensure the safety of those involved. Communication post-incident also becomes vital, as speaking about experiences and feelings can help the processing of emotions. Communication between law enforcement officers is unique in their understanding of one another's experiences and the occupational hazards that arise simply from showing up to work every day. Peers can be in a particularly helpful position to assist others because of the understanding they have regarding the occupation and occupational experiences (Grupe, 2023; Uhl et al., 2023). This unique understanding and camaraderie make peer support an important factor in processing trauma and stress for officers. The experience of critical incidents being stressful and unavoidable, as well as the evidence of peer support benefits, furthered the need for exploration into the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner.

In Chapter 3, the research strategies are introduced, including the methods, design, and rationale. It also introduces the phenomenological methodology that this study utilized to explore officer experience and perception. Ensuring adequate participants are chosen is a priority in dependable research. Therefore, inclusion and exclusion are identified. The dependability and confirmability of the study are further explored. Finally, the ethical procedures upheld in the study are explained and argued. Each of these areas comes together to support the reliability of the research while also being broken down to explain and demonstrate the reliability of this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the psychological perceptions of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. A phenomenological approach was used to collect the experiences and perceptions through semistructured interviews. The literature gathered in the previous chapter revealed the challenges officers face when they experience the stress of critical incidents. Critical incidents can have a profound psychological impact on law enforcement officers due to the stress they present (Craddock & Telesco, 2022; Roscoe et al., 2024). Stress and trauma emanate from the danger in critical incidents, with uncertainty in how they will end. Understanding the stress officers experience during traumatic incidents and leading up to them is necessary to understand how officers handle the incidents and the support needed following them. Law enforcement officers hold the duty of protecting and serving their communities, making it necessary to understand the stress they experience throughout these duties.

This chapter contains four major sections regarding the methods behind the study's research process. The four sections include the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, and the issues of trustworthiness. The research design and rationale cover the research questions, phenomenon, tradition, and rationale. The role of the researcher covers my involvement and responsibilities in this study. The methodology is a large section of this chapter that identifies the chosen population and

the participants, as well as the procedures for collecting the data. Finally, the issues of trustworthiness argue for the credibility of the study and the ethical guidelines behind it.

Research Design and Rationale

This study used Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman's cognitive appraisal theory and Don Drennon-Gala and Francis Cullen's social support theory, combined with Edmund Husserl's phenomenological approach, to explore the psychological perspectives of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. Critical incidents can have a significant and lasting impact on officers, making it necessary to understand more about these moments. The cognitive appraisal and social support theories were chosen to better understand how officers assess and feel supported in the decisions they make. Similarly, the phenomenological approach was chosen to better explore the experiences of the participants. With this approach in mind, the following research questions emerged as important:

- RQ 1: What are the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone?
- RQ 2: What are the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents with a partner?

A phenomenological approach allowed for the lived experiences of the participants to be focused upon to study a phenomenon from the first-person perspective (Lim, 2024). Due to the nature of the study, looking into officer perceptions and experiences, a qualitative phenomenological approach was chosen as appropriate. Police work is dangerous and challenging as officers encounter threats to their physical safety,

work taxing hours, and face other burdens (Arble et al., 2019). At the time of this study, there is little research on the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers themselves responding to critical incidents, and many of the studies that have been done in this area are dated. There is a need for up-to-date research on critical incidents in policing, and specifically, how officers themselves experience them. Discovering how officers experience critical incidents can better inform officer wellness and safety, policies, and laws surrounding them.

A qualitative design was chosen that included semistructured interviews with the participants. Interviews must be designed to minimize any bias among the participants; adding structure can help decrease this bias during the process (Bergelson et al., 2022). Semistructured interviews provide a predetermined set of interview questions with room for follow-up questions based on the answers the participants provide. Semistructured interviews also allow for unexpected topics to emerge, which can help counter potential researcher-centered bias that can exist with the expectations set forth by the researcher (Busetto et al., 2020). With such an intense subject and range of participant experiences, follow-up questions were expected and looked upon as beneficial for clarification of additional information and understanding, expanding on any initial expectations. Choosing a qualitative design, including semistructured interviews with a phenomenological approach, allowed this study to focus on the perspectives of law enforcement officers experiencing critical incidents.

Research Tradition

This study sought to gather data on the gap in understanding and knowledge in law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. The qualitative framework allowed for the perceptions and real-life experiences of officers to be explored. Gathering the participants' experiences and perceptions helps to answer the whys instead of the how much or how many (Tenny et al., 2022). The gap in the research involves the psychological experiences and perceptions of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone or with a partner. Therefore, to study this phenomenon, a phenomenological approach was determined to be appropriate.

Role of the Researcher

For this study, I assumed the role of the researcher as observer and interviewer to collect and analyze the data. As the researcher, I interacted with the law enforcement officer participants to learn about their psychological experiences responding to critical incidents with the dangers surrounding them while alone and while having a partner. There were no personal or professional relationships between myself and any of the participants of this study that could negatively impact or compromise its integrity. As a law enforcement officer myself, I was not in an authoritative position that directly oversaw any of the participants.

In this qualitative study, I also carried out the role of interviewer and observer, gathering data from participants through interviews. Semistructured interviews were used to better gather a more detailed understanding of law enforcement officers' experiences with critical incidents. When considering the role of the researcher in qualitative studies

involving interviews, it was important to address potential biases that may exist or emerge during the study. Using semistructured interviews helps to counter any bias that may exist with the researcher and expand on the pre-existing ideas brought to the study (Busetto et al., 2020). Researcher bias can ruin research studies, rendering them inapplicable as well as non-credible in their field, as the findings and information contained in them can be misleading and unreliable. For these reasons, a conscious effort was made to ensure that bias was not present or an influencing factor throughout the study.

As the researcher, my role was to ensure that this study continuously met and followed the ethical standards required. Ethics in qualitative research is relational and situational, requiring constant reflection and discussion to protect the research study (Taquette & Borges Da Matta Souza, 2022). Following ethical protocols is not only something that should be laid out in the beginning, but it is also a process that continues throughout the entirety of the study. The ethical standards demand the accuracy of the data and full disclosures, which contribute to the trustworthiness and integrity of the research findings (Miteu, 2024). Ethical standards were followed throughout this study for accuracy and trustworthiness to ensure the data was informative for law enforcement officers' responses to critical incidents.

Methodology

The theoretical framework that this study was grounded in is German philosopher Edmund Husserl's (1859-1938) theory of phenomenology. As a younger philosopher, Edmund Husserl noted there was more to research than gathering large amounts of data,

arguing that the study of consciousness could be much different than the study of nature (Sawicki, n.d.). This concept of philosophy was not immediately accepted in its early era (Landgrebe, 2024). But by the 20th century, Edmund Husserl was considered the “father” of the major phenomenological movement in philosophy (Sawicki, n.d.). Phenomenology is the study of phenomena through the perspective of those experiencing it, such as what was experienced and how it was experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019). It asks participants to elaborate on their subjective perspectives of experience to understand phenomena better.

In his argument for phenomenology, Husserl agreed that the science of looking at how the world exists in itself was important. However, he criticized the objective attempts to define reality completely independent from subjective experience and interpretation (Cudjoe, 2023). Exploring participants’ experiences can add a level of understanding to research that goes beyond the objective facts of science. In its study of consciousness, phenomenology also attempts to connect philosophy, science, and lifeworld altogether, highlighting the rich contextualized descriptions based on the experience of participants (Davidsen, 2013). The phenomenological approach is used to capture closely the way a phenomenon is experienced within the context it occurs (Davidsen, 2013), providing an applicable framework for further understanding critical incidents through the perspectives of law enforcement officers within the context of experiencing them.

Using Husserl’s theory of phenomenology, this study looked at the experiences and perceptions of law enforcement officers in critical incidents. Gathering data from

participants through a phenomenological approach moves from descriptions to universal essences of the phenomenon, grasping the consciousness itself (Neubauer et al., 2019). The data gathered from the phenomenological approach with officers provided an in-depth look into these experiences personally, which expanded the knowledge base already gathered concerning these incidents. Using a qualitative approach, this study asked law enforcement officers to explain their experiences of critical incidents alone and with a partner, using a phenomenological approach appropriate for focusing on the experiences officers have had.

Participant Selection Logic

Qualitative Interviews

Due to the nature of this study, a qualitative approach was chosen for the expansion of knowledge through participant interaction. The interviews in qualitative research provide the opportunity to explore the rich textures of the human experience and the perspectives of the participants to explore a phenomenon (Lim, 2024). Law enforcement officers were the chosen participants for this study to gain first-hand knowledge of their psychological experiences with critical incidents. Studying these experiences is important for gaining a larger picture of the social phenomena beyond what can be learned from numerical data. Officers themselves are a strong source of this data as they are the ones responding to critical incidents as a part of their daily responsibilities.

Data Saturation and Sample Size

Data saturation can be described as the point at which no new data or themes emerge from the data set, indicating that the data has been fully explored (Naeem et al., 2024). It can also be described as a conceptual yardstick to estimate and assess the sample size in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2020). Both sample size and data saturation contribute to the findings of the research being an accurate representation of the larger studied population. A quality sample size provides the opportunity to conclude from smaller samples that represent a population without studying the entirety of the population, which can be nearly impossible (Andrade, 2020). When choosing a sample size, it is important to remember that the number of participants required can vary among the numerous areas of study. For example, there can be different sample sizes needed for a study in a topic area conducting interviews of officers than a study in a different topic area conducting focus groups on young children.

Donald Polkinghorne (1989), known for contributing great progress to the phenomenological method, recommended five to twenty-five interview participants who had experienced a phenomenon for a sample size. More recently, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) reiterated that qualitative studies vary based on the topic and population being studied. It is important to remember that the raw data from the interviews comes from the participants themselves, especially their consciousness of themselves and others (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). With this in mind, the type of coding process chosen to analyze participant data is also important to consider when choosing a sample size. This study will utilize thematic saturation as its process of coding, which Wutich et al. (2024)

recommend recruiting no less than nine interviewees, with twelve to thirteen being an ideal sample size. Considering these recommendations and this qualitative study following a phenomenological methodology with a thematic saturation coding process, the target sample size is around twelve participants, but will continue or conclude when data saturation has been reached.

Participant Selection

The participants for this study were law enforcement officers in the state of Illinois with experience responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. Officers who have had a reasonable amount of time working in law enforcement and experience in critical incident response were chosen from various police departments in Illinois, USA. According to the Uniform Crime Reporting Program utilized by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), approximately 60 officers were feloniously killed in the United States in the year 2023 (FBI Press Office, 2024). Despite the number of officers being killed decreasing slightly over the last few years, the number of officers assaulted has steadily increased (FBI Press Office, 2024). This presents concerns for the safety and well-being of the officers dedicated to protecting and serving communities. Civilians also get injured during critical incidents as peace is attempted to be restored, and officers respond to assist. Data collection resources show that in the United States in 2024, over one thousand people were killed by the police (Fatal Force, 2024; Mapping police violence, n.d.). With the rates of fatal encounters increasing over the last few years, 2024 shows the highest fatalities on record (Fatal Force, 2024). The dangers presented to both

officers and civilians in the United States made it necessary to focus on the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers during critical incidents.

Upon determining to focus on law enforcement officers specifically in the state of Illinois, it was necessary to determine police departments that would have eligible officers meeting the criteria for the study. Sometimes, when the police are dispatched to a call requiring two officer units, only one officer unit is available to respond (Simpson & Grossman, 2024). Four years was chosen as a reasonable amount of time for officers to articulate different incidents they had experienced. To combat any potential bias in the study, the participants were not known to and did not know the researcher. With all these inclusion criteria being required of participants, any of these that were not affirmed as true served as exclusion criteria for choosing participants.

Participant Inclusion Criteria

The following criteria are both required and asked of the participants before the study:

- Has been a law enforcement officer for four or more years.
- Has experienced critical incidents both alone and with a partner.
- Works for a law enforcement department in the State of Illinois.
- Does not know the researcher, nor does the researcher know the individual.

If any of these inclusion criteria were not met, it was considered an exclusion criterion, such as if the officer did not have four or more years of experience in law enforcement, then they were excluded as a potential participant.

Instrumentation

The main research instrument used in this study was interviews, as the data was collected through semistructured interviews that included open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted via phone, a data collection tool is useful for gathering a variety of information from participants regarding their psychological experiences during stressful encounters at work. An interview guide (Appendix A) was developed based on the gap in the literature regarding the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. The questions in this interview guide were written as open-ended and are designed to bridge the gap in the literature on critical incidents. Upon completion of the interviews, they were transcribed into text format for analysis. The coding process then began, looking for common themes in the data. With the nine participant interviews, data saturation was confirmed in the coding process and during thematic identification.

Procedures for Pilot Study

The created interview guide was piloted to ensure effectiveness and accuracy, and to allow a pilot participant to suggest potential changes to the interview questions. The interview questions were open-ended to gather data on critical incident experiences of law enforcement officers. Upon completion of the pilot study, the transcript and feedback were shared with the researcher's chair.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

For the recruitment procedures, introduction packets were created using a program such as Google Forms and Microsoft Word to create a questionnaire that

addressed the identified criteria questions. The introduction packet included the recruitment flyer (Appendix B) that provided a brief introduction to the study and its intent. The packet also included the informed consent form that further detailed the intent of the study, the confidentiality surrounding the participant responses, participant rights, and the ability to stop the interview at any point in time. The guidelines for anonymity by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University were also explained to participants in the packet.

Data Analysis Plan

Once the interviews were conducted, the recordings were transcribed into text for data analysis. Transcriptions were conducted using Otter, an artificial intelligence program that assists in producing transcripts from audio files. Each interview was read over multiple times, as it was essential to fully understand each participant's experience. Once each interview was transcribed and thoroughly read, an analysis of the data began. The data analysis plan was based on Amedeo Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method of analysis. The three main steps in this analysis process included reading the data to get a sense of the whole, breaking the data down into units, understanding the meaning of each unit, and transforming each of the participants' natural expressions into phenomenologically and psychologically sensitive expressions (Beck, 2021). With these expressions, themes were identified within the data for analysis. Upon conclusion of the data analysis, the expressions and themes were then gathered to better understand the accounts of the law enforcement officers' psychological experiences of critical incidents.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in research is imperative to the implementation of the findings and the applicability of the collected data. When considering the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability should be evaluated to help ensure the validity of the research data (Adler, 2022). Upon the conclusion of gathering and reviewing the literature, I gathered data from multiple predetermined participants to help build credibility and dependability. As the researcher, I also ensured that the chosen participants met the requirements to best represent the studied population, and the data was presented to my committee to help support transferability and confirmability. The following sections further describe these different areas of the research outlined in this study.

Credibility

Credibility is the status of being trustworthy or providing the ability to be taken seriously. In qualitative research, the credibility of the study looks at how the data transfers to reality and its similarity to other data findings (Stahl & King, 2020). Credibility begins with the researcher and author of the study portraying to the reader that the content and data in the study can be believed. This can also be done through triangulation, with the integration of multiple data sources used to assist in validating the findings (Ahmed, 2024). Research that is not credible can have negative effects on the body of research and data already collected on the subject matter. This study utilized these approaches to establish credibility in the triangulation of data throughout, particularly in Chapter 2, the literature review, and with the participants. Each

participant's eligibility was confirmed using the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board's *Officer Lookup* database to further establish credibility with the participants of the study as well.

Transferability

The act of transferring something is to take it from one place and put it in another, moving it somewhere else. Transferability in qualitative research refers to the degree to which the research data can be extrapolated to alternative contexts (Ahmed, 2024). It is important in research that the data gathered can be applied to others and not just the participants who contributed. Qualitative studies look at a selection of participants because studying the entire population on all the different research topics would be a time-consuming project. Transferability is the means of taking the abstracted data drawn from the selected participants and applying it to others who have not been directly studied (Drisko, 2024). The small selection of participants in this study was confirmed to have met all the inclusion criteria requirements to help ensure the transferability of the data gathered.

Dependability

Dependability is one of the major criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research that focuses on the consistency of the data and how it can be applied to similar settings. Although there are many different arguments for what dependability means (Janis, 2022), one way to describe it is the reliability and consistency of the research as ethical guidelines are followed and changes are recorded (Forero et al., 2018). To demonstrate dependability, an interview guide was created with predetermined questions

for the participants. The interview guide helped to ensure the structured path of the interview, as well as how the questions followed ethical guidelines. Data saturation was also appropriately reached to ensure all emerging themes were gathered during the study. These steps help to ensure the study is reliable and can be applied to similar populations with comparable results.

Confirmability

Confirmability can be described as the degree to which the findings of the research can be confirmed by other researchers and establish that the data interpretation and findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination but are derived from the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Confirmability is essential to research as it enables others outside the research to understand how conclusions are reached and to create research with similar results if desired. Triangulation is utilized to confirm the data gathered and the findings of the research to ensure it is evaluated from multiple perspectives. Investigator triangulation is a category of triangulation in which a seasoned researcher can contribute to the research process led by a less experienced or novice researcher (Amin et al., 2020). Throughout this study, the chair, an experienced researcher, oversaw the research findings, analysis, and conclusions to support confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

Treatment of Participants

This study followed the guidelines set forth by the IRB, providing participants with informed consent agreement forms, details of the study, procedures, benefits, potential risks, information regarding confidentiality and privacy, and methods of

recording. It is an important ethical obligation for a researcher to support participants in making fair, informed, and voluntary decisions to enroll in a study to fulfill their roles (Matandika et al., 2021). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw their consent and leave the study at any time with or without reason. Participants who chose to participate were assigned a numerical code that corresponded with their interview to maintain anonymity. After each of the interviews were complete, the participants were provided with a \$10 Amazon gift card as noted in the participant flyer and approved by Walden's IRB (approval no. 08-08-25-1163838). The interviews were transcribed and placed in a secure location protected with a lock and password for the next five years. After five years, the files will be properly destroyed and disposed of.

Treatment of Data

To maintain confidentiality in this study, participants were assigned a numerical code to identify them in their interviews while concealing their identities. The personal information of participants is known only to the researcher, the chair, and the second committee member. During the interview, the researcher did not disclose any personal information due to the audio recording to avoid revealing the identity of the participants. The interview and participant data are password-protected and stored for five years before being destroyed.

Threats to Validity

Validity can be described as the appropriateness of the tools, processes, and data chosen for and gathered in the study (Leung, 2015). With the utilization of qualitative interviewing in this study, the main source of data collection will be the interviews

facilitated by the researcher. Due to the nature of the researcher and participants being human, potential threats to validity must be addressed, and guidelines must be set forth to avoid compromised data. Threats to validity can be broken down into four different categories, including statistical conclusion validity, internal validity, construct validity, and external validity (Matthay & Glymour, 2020). Any of these four areas of validity contains the ability to threaten the trustworthiness of the research.

To minimize threats to validity, I, as the researcher, remained consciously aware of the potential biases that could arise and ensured the ability to deal with issues that arose. Any changes made to the study were tracked. The interview guide and participant answers were shared with the chair and committee members for approval. At any point in time, if participants wished to withdraw their participation in the study, they were allowed to discontinue the process without any animosity whatsoever. No participants withdrew their participation in this study. IRB guidelines were also followed to protect the participants of the study and further the trustworthiness and validity of this study.

Summary

Chapter 3 established the research methods for this study, highlighting many different areas of the data gathering and analysis process. A qualitative study utilizing a phenomenological methodology with semistructured interviews was chosen to gain first-hand experience with officers. The established research questions asked about the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. In this chapter, the inclusion criteria were set forth for participants, and the introduction packet includes confidentiality agreements, informed

consent, and more. Each of these added to the trustworthiness of not only the participants but also the researcher and the data. Trustworthiness is crucial for a research study as it helps establish validity and applicability to the data it collects and analyzes. Chapter 4 will include the participant demographics, data collection and analysis, results, trustworthiness, and more.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. Chapters 1 through 3 introduced critical incidents in law enforcement and the importance of developing a deeper understanding of them. In Chapter 2, a literature review was conducted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various aspects involved in critical incidents. Multiple research studies have been done that demonstrate the impact critical incidents can have on law enforcement officers. Impacts can include, but are not limited to, psychological impacts such as PTSD, physiological impacts such as stress responses, functional impacts such as coordination, and more. Such studies demonstrate the impacts critical incidents can have but have not focused on the psychological impacts on officers responding to critical incidents regarding partner status. Therefore, the following two research questions were developed to further understand the phenomenon:

- RQ 1: What are the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone?
- RQ 2: What are the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents with a partner?

Before data collection began, approval from Walden University's IRB was received. For this study, Edmund Husserl's phenomenological approach was used to explore the first-hand experiences of officers responding to critical incidents. The interview guide was developed with semistructured questions to understand critical

incidents from the perspectives of the officers experiencing them. The interview questions asked participants to describe incidents in which they had responded to describe their perspectives and experiences, focusing on having a partner or not having a partner.

Upon completion of the data collection, Giorgi's phenomenological data analysis method was used to identify the meaning units in the participants' responses that make up the general structure and themes. Nine interviews were conducted via phone calls, using the semistructured questions in the interview guide (Appendix A). During the data analysis of these nine interviews, five themes and four subthemes emerged. This chapter elaborates on each of the nine interviews with the meaning units identified from the transcripts and quotations containing rich data. The pilot study, which was successful, is described in detail. Next, the settings of the interviews and the demographics of the participants are covered in detail. The data collection process is explained as to how the data for the study was gathered and the procedures that were followed. Then, the data analysis process, which used Giorgi's data analysis method, is described. The evidence of trustworthiness is elaborated on and broken down into sections of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, the results of the study are disclosed and demonstrated in detail, including many of the participants' responses.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to test the effectiveness and accuracy of the interview guide and interview questions. A pilot study is conducted on a smaller scale than the full-scale study to assess the aspects of the study and provides the opportunity to

improve the efficiency of the main study (In, 2017). Teresi et al. (2022) further describe pilot studies as testing the feasibility of the methods and procedures that will be used in full-scale studies. For the pilot study, one participant was recruited, and the consent form was sent to them via email before the interview. After the participant had given consent, the interview was scheduled based on the participant's availability. The interview was conducted on Zoom and audio recorded only via voice memo. After the interview was complete, the participant was asked for their feedback, to which the participant reported positive feedback and offered no suggestions for changes. With the feasibility and methods tested on the pilot study, I, the researcher, moved on to the main study.

Setting

The interviews for this study were scheduled based on the participants' availability and the times that worked best for them. The interviews were conducted via audio, allowing the participants to be comfortable in their natural environments. While conducting the interviews, it was ensured that I was in a private space where no one could overhear the conversations to maintain the confidentiality of the study. None of the interviews went over the 60 minutes listed on the consent form approved by the IRB, and each time the duration varied based on the experience and the level of volubility the participants brought to the interview.

Demographics

Nine law enforcement officers participated in this study. The inclusion criteria included working as a law enforcement officer in the State of Illinois for more than four years, experience with critical incidents, and not being known to me as the researcher. To

help protect the identity and reinforce the confidentiality of the participants, they were assigned participant numbers for the interviews in lieu of their names. The following demographic information was obtained from the participants: sex, years in law enforcement, and position (Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Descriptive Data

Participant Alphanumeric Code	Sex	Years in Law Enforcement	Position
P1	Male	8 Years	Police officer
P2	Male	8 Years	Police officer
P3	Female	6 Years	Police officer
P4	Female	11 Years	Police officer
P5	Male	19 Years	Sergeant
P6	Male	6 Years	Police officer
P7	Male	25 Years	Police officer
P8	Female	5 Years	Detective
P9	Female	17 Years	Police officer

Data Collection

The recruitment strategy included posting and sharing the recruitment flyer on social media and professional networks. Potential participants who reached out via phone or email regarding the flyer were sent the consent form via email. After the participants voluntarily sent the “I consent” reply, their interviews were conducted based on their availability.

Before conducting each interview, I made sure to clear my mind and be conscious of all thoughts. Englander and Morley (2023) argued that each phenomenological study

should seek to allow the phenomenon to express itself in its own distinctive way. With this in mind, intentionality was placed on being aware of my own thoughts before and during the interviews, so the nature of the phenomenon showed in the data itself.

The interviews were conducted in September 2025 via phone call for the convenience of the participants' schedules and the comfort level of being in their own natural environments. The semistructured interview guide (Appendix A) was used for each interview. The interview guide appeared to be used successfully, with the semistructured design that allowed for follow-up questions when answers were vague or needed clarification.

During the interviews, the participants were able to answer the questions freely and comfortably, with none of the participants withdrawing. All the interviews resulted in purposeful data provided by the participants, reaching data saturation at number nine. After completion of each interview, the participants were sent the \$10 Amazon gift card as mentioned in the recruitment flyer. Each interview was recorded via voice memo, and the recordings were transcribed using Otter. The recordings helped to ensure the interviews could be transcribed verbatim, which is recommended by Giorgi's (2009) data analysis method to help ensure consistency and true representation. After using Otter to transcribe the interviews, each was checked for accuracy by listening to the recordings while reading through the transcripts several times. Throughout the data collection process, the parameters indicated in Chapter 3 were followed, including encrypting and securing all the data. After the interviews and throughout data collection, reflective journal entries were made with my thoughts and feelings. Additionally, after the

transcript and initial coding were completed, member checking was used to confirm the findings and data with the participants.

During the interview process, a challenge arose as it was determined that there were several participants who were ineligible for the study and appeared to be falsifying information for the monetary gain of the gift card. After this discovery, it was determined that the best course of action to support an unbiased data collection process would be to start over with data collection rather than selecting certain interviews to keep. Starting over, the interviews were still conducted in the month of September 2025. After starting over, the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board's Officer Lookup database was utilized to search and confirm the eligibility of the participants.

Data Analysis

Giorgi's descriptive analysis follows four steps: reading for a sense of the whole, determining the meaning units, transforming participants' natural expressions, and writing the general structure (Beck, 2021). In the first step, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed using Otter. After transcription, I listened to the interviews while reading them to ensure verbatim accuracy. Once satisfied with accuracy, I read and listened multiple times to understand their overall meaning. From there, meaning units were identified in the participants' interviews. These meaning units captured the participants' own words as they described their experiences.

After identifying the meaning units, the participants' natural expressions were transformed into phenomenological expressions, which is the third step in Giorgi's analysis. This challenging step meant interrogating the meaning units to find

psychological implications. Participants' meaning units can vary greatly. However, the underlying psychological meanings can be the same (Beck, 2021). Recognizing this was important. During the analysis, each interview was transformed individually, focusing on their psychological expressions first. Once identified, similar psychological meanings and themes were sought. This approach ensured each participant was accurately represented, not influenced by others' themes.

Finally, after identifying the phenomenological expressions and meaning units, they were then used to write the general structure as a whole. Each participant's response was re-read again to get a better understanding as a whole of the meaning units and phenomenological expressions identified. This step is a holistic review of all key meanings of the phenomenon from all the participants to determine the key general structure as a whole (Beck, 2021). By breaking down the data and then evaluating it as a whole once again, it provided a rich understanding of the experiences of the participants and highlights important themes.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility is a contentious issue in qualitative research, referring to the trustworthiness, authenticity, and plausibility of the research data (Vella, 2024). During this study, several measures and techniques were applied to establish and maintain the credibility of the data. These measures included following closely the guidelines approved by Walden's IRB, consulting the approved methods throughout the process.

Triangulation of the data was used through interviewing multiple participants with unique experiences.

Before the interviews, the informed consent form was emailed to the participants, to which they replied giving their consent. During the interviews, the semistructured interview guide (Appendix A) was utilized, which provided the opportunity for follow-up questions if needed. Rapport was established and built with the participants, and an understanding and compassionate listening style was applied to help them feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

Personal measures were taken, such as keeping a journal of my thoughts and setting aside my personal assumptions and beliefs during this process. By practicing removing my beliefs and personal assumptions and listening to the participants, the personal experiences of the participants were captured and provided rich data for the study. A concept referred to as bracketing describes the temporary suspension of the natural attitude of daily living, permitting the primal phenomena of the world to be seen freshly (Thomas & Sohn, 2023). Bracketing during the interview and data analysis allows for the experiences of the participants to be shown and represented accurately and richly. Member checking was used after transcription and initial coding to confirm the data from the participants. Member checking provides the participants with the opportunity to confirm or clarify what they meant in the data. Each of these measures taken to protect the integrity and accuracy of the findings provided rich data for the study.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research can be broken down into three main approaches: the applicability as the provision of sufficient information for readers to evaluate the research in other contexts, the resonance as the researcher presents the research in a way that evokes a sense of familiarity, and finally, the theoretical engagement as the way the researcher uses theory to frame a problem and connect the findings to propose a theory that can explain the phenomenon (Stalmeijer et al., 2024). With these three approaches in mind, the transferability of the study would mean that the findings of the experiences and perspectives of the participants could be applied to similar law enforcement officers as well. This study is transferable in that there are nine qualitative interview participants ranging in years of unique experiences, there is a sense of familiarity with the interview questions and the participants' responses, the data align with the literature, and the proposed problem is framed with the research gap. The results of this study may be useful in exploring the experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents. However, more research still needs to be done in this area and on this population to better understand law enforcement response to critical incidents and to better fill the research gap.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the researcher providing a detailed description of the study process, enabling the work to be replicated in other situations (Johnson et al., 2020). Precise descriptions of the research process, including participant criteria, data analysis, bracketing, journaling, and other relevant details, contribute to the

establishment of dependability for the study. An example of dependability in this study was the nine diverse participants who represented various ranks, sexes, and times in law enforcement in the State of Illinois. The selection of these participants, male and female, with their various years of service, provided relevant, saturated, and rich descriptive data of the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner in the State of Illinois.

Confirmability

Confirmability can be described as the neutrality of the researcher's interpretations of the findings that are free from bias, including social bias (Nyirenda et al., 2020). Confirmability can be improved by multiple different approaches, including peer debriefing, member checking, and reflective journaling. The interviews with participants were transcribed verbatim, and this data was used for the analysis. The data analysis uses verbatim words taken from the participants themselves. After the transcription, initial coding was completed, and the findings were shared with the participants to check for accuracy, a process known as member checking. Each participant was provided with their transcript and the researcher's takeaways from their interview via email. In the email, the participants were invited to share their input, and were asked to inform the researcher of any updates or corrections they felt needed to be made, but none of the participants provided updates or corrections. Throughout the data collection process, reflective journaling was used to consciously evaluate my thoughts and understanding of the research. These examples help to improve the confirmability of

the study through verification of the data interpretation accuracy and continuous monitoring of the thoughts of the researcher.

Results

Each of the interview transcriptions, notes, and journal reflections was studied to discover the meaning and perceived responses from the participants' experiences. The nine participants were asked nine questions with six sub-questions. These questions and follow-up questions asked about the participants' experiences responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. The first two questions asked the participants for background information about joining law enforcement, such as how long they have been in law enforcement, what rank they hold, what their expectations were, etc. The questions then went on to ask the participants about their experiences with critical incidents. After asking the participants about their experiences, the questions transitioned into asking the participants about the psychology of critical incidents and coping mechanisms. Finally, the final question asked participants if they had any additional information they wanted to share. After careful review of each response and meaning units, five themes and four subthemes emerged from them.

Theme 1: Critical Incidents as Moments That Can Involve Injury and Mental Components

The research questions align with theme one, which asked what came to mind when thinking of critical incidents. The average response from participants described a time-sensitive moment that can involve injury and mental components as well. Multiple participants explained how critical incidents are time sensitive and need attention and

immediate action to resolve. Participants explained that critical incidents can involve injury, such as death or great bodily harm. An example of these injury incidents that was given by multiple participants was shootings. Participants also added that critical incidents can involve mental components, such as individuals in crisis or the mental effects that the incidents can have on the participants. Below in Table 2 are the meaning units and the correlating themes that emerged from them.

Table 2

Meaning Units and Theme 1

Meaning Units	Theme 1
“Involving death or great bodily harm,” such as “shootings,” and “mental health components,” such as “someone suicidal.”	Critical incidents as moments that can involve injury and mental components

Each participant brought forth their own thoughts on critical incidents based on their experiences. A majority of the participants described critical incidents as time-sensitive moments, with some of those same participants as well as others describing them as involving injury or mental health considerations. From the participants’ responses, many of them included examples of critical incidents based on their experiences, such as shootings, high-risk missing individuals, suicidal calls, and more. Below are a few responses from the participants themselves.

P1 stated:

Anything with a person with a weapon, or like a knife, that’s like, actively trying to harm people, or just swinging around, or has a gun, and they’re like, I would

say that's a critical incident, in my opinion. Someone suicidal, that's trying to attempt suicide, like they're actually on the ledge and they want to drop or they have the weapon in their hand and they want to harm themselves, I would say that's a critical incident. So I think it has to be like something where somebody is in jeopardy, or putting others in jeopardy of being, being like killed, or they have the possibility of receiving great bodily harm.

P2 stated:

Critical incidents, I would think anything that involves death or great bodily harm. But I would also actually include in there something where, you know, let's say a high risk missing, right, like a child is missing or somebody with developmental disabilities. I think that also could be considered a critical incident where time is of the essence, it has potential very quickly to turn into something critical.

Additionally, P5 stated that "Critical Incidents can be anything from a, from a person attempting to commit suicide all the way up to a mass shooting, or an active shooter, or something extremely critical." P8 stated that "Usually what comes to mind is like, you know, shootings or a person shot, or, you know, just something with a person injured, where you have to quickly make decisions." Despite each of these responses from the participants describing situations that came to their minds when thinking of critical incidents based on their individual experiences, there were still commonalities that emerged from them.

Theme one is important in demonstrating what came to the minds of participants when thinking of critical incidents. Many of the participants provided examples or

specific situations that came to mind regarding critical incidents, such as shootings, individuals injured, suicidal people, and more. Situations that can involve injury, that can be time sensitive, and that can involve mental health components. P5's example of an individual attempting to commit suicide or a mass shooting encompasses all three of these elements. With the study looking into the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents, this theme and subsequent subthemes emerge as important psychological aspects as they relate to the research questions.

Theme 2: Critical Incidents Can Involve Violence and Psychological Impacts on Participants

The research question aligns with theme two, which inquired about critical incidents the participants may carry with them. The average response from the participants described incidents involving violence and psychological impacts on the participants, including an appreciation for life after the incident. Multiple participants elaborated on how critical incidents can involve violence and danger to officers and to other individuals they encounter. Participants also reported having an appreciation for life after surviving incidents or witnessing violence. The participants provided examples of violence and appreciation, such as the after-effects of homicide scenes and shootings.

Table 3*Meaning Units and Theme 2/Subtheme*

Meaning Units	Theme 2/Subtheme
“a three-year-old shot... I remember that I went outside to take a couple of deep breaths in order to calm my body down because it was such a shocking experience for me.”	Critical incidents can involve violence and psychological impacts on participants
“I don’t take life, you know, for granted” and “Life is very fragile, that I think that I have a deeper gratitude of my relatives that are younger than me.”	Appreciation for life after experiencing critical incidents

Each participant again brought forth their own experiences of critical incidents they have responded to. A majority of the participants described specific situations they experienced as involving the presence of violence or the threat of violence, psychological impacts, and an appreciation of life after the incident. From the participants’ responses, many of them included personal stories of their experiences with critical incidents and how they felt even afterwards. Below are a few responses from the participants describing this.

P7 stated:

It was pretty much the after the after effect of a homicide scene where the mother of...children were, she was raped and killed in front of them. And they witnessed it...I don’t think we take into consideration how things affect victims or the family of the actual victims themselves.

P9 stated:

And I felt like I was really alone, and just like his eyes, that stare really got to me. So I police differently in the sense that I always want to know where my partner is at least so I could see them.

P2 stated:

I responded to the scene of a mass shooting... That kind of opened my eyes to how dangerous this line of work can be. So I wouldn't say that I police something different because of that incident, just maybe I'm maybe a little bit more aware, right. Conscientious I guess that would be the right way to phrase it.

P7's example encompasses the violence aspect, the psychological aspects of the after-effects of critical incidents. P9 described feeling alone in the moment with her partner in the other room, unaware of what the individual would do. P2 recalled responding to a mass shooting that opened their eyes to the dangers of policing after seeing the multiple victims. Furthermore, P4 recalled a critical incident that was "a three-year-old shot... I remember that I went outside to take a couple of deep breaths in order to calm my body down because it was such a shocking experience for me. It is very hard, you know." P6 described an incident in which an individual "was going to commit suicide, so we responded, and she kind of barricaded herself in the, in her, in her apartment." Each of these responses from participants described incidents in which they experienced or responded to as a law enforcement officer. The interview questions directly related to this theme is particularly key to the study as they describe real-life

critical incidents that have impacted the lives of the law enforcement participants who experienced them.

Theme two is important in describing the critical incidents that the participants have experienced and the impacts they carry with them. The participants provided a variety of examples of specific incidents in which they were involved. Many of the participants referred to shooting incidents that included children being shot, mass shootings, officer shootings, and more. It is important to note that a majority of these participants' examples of critical incidents they were involved in regarded danger to other individuals rather than themselves. This theme is important in exemplifying the seriousness of the critical incidents that participants experience, with the psychological impacts of them as well as an appreciation of life afterwards.

Subtheme: Appreciation for Life After Experiencing Critical Incidents

Emerging as a subtheme, many of the participants reported feeling a greater appreciation for life after experiencing critical incidents. Participants described feeling appreciation for their lives and the lives of others after witnessing danger either to themselves or to others. The responses from participants were based on real-life events they had experienced and how they were impacted by those particular events. Below are some of the responses from participants that build this subtheme of appreciation for life.

P7 stated:

It's an experience. So I have to understand that that doesn't happen all the time. You keep it with you, but you don't. You don't let it guide you, and you use it because you have to show empathy for other people who may experience

something like that. You draw from that experience, and you let people know, yes, it's bad, what they're going through.

Additionally, P1 stated, "I don't take life, you know, for granted...I'm still willing to do what I have to do to protect others, even if I don't like them, or if I even agree with them." P4 stated, "Life is very fragile, that I think that I have a deeper gratitude of my relatives that are younger than me." P1 described not taking life for granted, even when it may be someone he may not like, he is still willing to protect their lives. P4 described something similar in her experiences of recognizing that life is fragile and having a deeper gratitude for younger people. P7 described letting people know "it's going to pass" and to draw from the experience of what they are going through.

These descriptions and examples provided by the participants described an appreciation for their lives and the lives of others after critical incidents. Their appreciation for life post-incident was exemplified in descriptions such as drawing from incidents, protecting the lives of others even when they may not like them, and having a greater appreciation for life and the lives of those younger. This subtheme emerges as important in this study, as it shows the aftereffects of how critical incidents can impact officers.

Theme 3: Majority of Participants Reported Being Conscious of Possible Situations and Gathering Information to Develop Plans

The research question aligns with theme three, which asked participants about responding to critical incidents without a partner. A majority of participants reported being conscious of possible situations they could experience and gathering information to

develop a plan. Multiple participants explained their awareness of not having a partner, balancing whether they would need backup, and also the availability of backup if needed. Participants also described how they gather as much information as possible, especially before arriving, to develop a plan for handling the situation. The participants provided examples of this, such as watching one's back a little more, watching one's approach, waiting for backup if possible, thinking through what could happen, and more.

Table 4

Meaning Units and Theme 3/Subtheme

Meaning Units	Theme 3/Subtheme
“So you have to be a little bit more careful when you're showing up to stuff... just planning for anything that could, that could happen, that could go wrong, basically.”	Majority of participants reported being conscious of possible situations and gathering information to develop plans
“You have to think about calling for backup, and you have to think about what you could run into alone.”	Awareness of not having a partner and the availability of backup

Each participant shared their thoughts on responding to critical incidents alone based on their experiences. A majority of the participants described gathering information to develop plans while being conscious of potential situations they could experience. From these responses, many of them included detailed thought processes they have gone through while responding to critical incidents.

P5 stated:

You obviously have to watch your own back a little bit more. You have to think about calling for backup, and you have to think about what you could run into

alone. So you have to be a little bit more careful when you're showing up to stuff... Usually, what could go wrong. If it's a critical incident, like a shooting, you have to watch your approach, because obviously the offender could still be in the area. So just planning for anything that could, that could happen, that could go wrong, basically.

P1 stated:

I do try to slow things down, because I, like, for me, if I was, like, dealing with some kind of critical incident by myself, I usually just wait for backup, unless it's absolutely needed, and I'm like, right there, and I need help immediately... My thing is like, what do I have? ... If I'm able to, I like to plan, I like to figure out what I can do.

P8 stated:

Typically, do I have to render aid? ... I'm just like, what am I or is this, like, you know, do I need to have my gun drawn? Is this something where there's still someone who is a threat, like, I just kind of like going through what could happen. What do I need to potentially be prepared for? ... So just, like, things you would never think would happen. I'm like, okay, what are we walking into? What do we need to do when we get there?

P5 described having to watch his back a little more, being a little more careful, and watching his approach when responding without a partner. P5 also reported considering calling for backup if he felt it was going to be needed. P1 explained slowing things down and trying to wait for backup if possible while evaluating what was going

on. P8 described the thoughts that came to mind, such as going through the possibilities that may be awaiting her arrival on the scene. Additionally, P4 reported, “You know, the time when you, you know, receiving the call, you’re prepping. You’re developing a plan.” P2 described, “We are trained to kind of consider possibilities, right. You want to be prepared.” Each of these responses from participants demonstrates the thoughts that have gone through their minds during a critical incident response.

Theme three is important in describing what officers experience when they respond to critical incidents without a partner. A majority of the participants described having a conscious awareness of potential situations that could happen and gathering information to develop plans of approach. This theme is important in exploring the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents, due to the specific distinction of the question asking about responses without a partner.

Subtheme: Awareness of Not Having a Partner and the Availability of Backup

Emerging as a subtheme, some participants described being aware of not having a partner and the availability of backup. Participants described their awareness of not having a partner, whether they would need backup, the availability of backup if they needed it, and more. Each of the responses emerged from real experiences the participants had gone through, with many of them gathering their thoughts from many different situations they have found themselves in. Below are some of the responses from the participants that made up this subtheme of the awareness of not having a partner and the availability of backup.

P2 stated:

I'll say that it's stressful. It makes you have to make split second decisions which could affect your life, the person's life that you are coming into contact with, and just generally, members of the public.

P3 stated:

So if I'm by myself, I always think about like calling for backup, if I feel like things, or if I get a feeling or if I feel like things are not gonna go smoothly, you know, like the person is getting aggressive or something.

P2 stated that it's stressful having to make split-second decisions that can affect the lives of others. P3 reported the consideration of calling for backup when it feels like the individual may become aggressive. Additionally, P1 reported, "I usually just wait for backup, unless it's absolutely needed, and I'm like, right there, and I need help immediately." P5 reported, "You have to think about calling for backup, and you have to think about what you could run into alone." P2 described an incident in which he had to make a high-risk traffic stop alone. "Backup is about four minutes away, which doesn't seem like a lot, but it can be a long time... So obviously, adrenaline is pumping, getting ready for that, you know, fight or flight response, so to speak." Each of these participant responses highlighted their thoughts and considerations for backup when responding to critical incidents.

This subtheme emerges as important because of its direct applicability to the research question of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone. The participants formulated these responses from both specific incidents and overall

experiences in their careers as well. From waiting for backup to having the immediacy of needing to act quickly even without having backup right away, these are experiences that participants have gone through. These thoughts highlight the conscious awareness of the participants responding to critical incidents without a partner and the availability of backup.

Theme 4: Majority of Participants Preferred Responding to Critical Incidents with a Partner

The research question aligns with theme four, which asked participants if they preferred responding to critical incidents with a partner or without a partner. A majority of participants reported preferring to respond to critical incidents with a partner. While a majority of the participants reported preferences in responding with a partner, each of them brought their own explanations of why, based on their experiences. Even with their unique experiences, subthemes of safety considerations and teamwork still emerged among the responses given by the participants.

Table 5*Meaning Units and Theme 4/Subthemes*

Meaning Units	Theme 4/Subthemes
“With a partner, definitely.”	Majority of participants preferred responding to critical incidents with a partner
“I would prefer a partner, just for safety issues, because you never really know what’s going to happen with that incident or any incident for that matter.”	Safety considerations when responding to critical incidents
“Definitely with a partner. Because you have to have teamwork. You have to have people helping you.”	Opportunities for teamwork when responding to critical incidents

Each of the participants disclosed their preference for partner status when responding to critical incidents based on their experience. A majority of the participants reported preferring to respond to critical incidents with a partner. From the responses, multiple reasons emerged for the reasoning behind participants’ preferring to respond with a partner. These reasons included partners seeing different things, the opportunities for teamwork, and the ability to contribute skill sets to situations.

P1 stated:

Definitely with a partner. Because you have to have teamwork. You have to have people helping you. It’s very easy to get in tunnel vision on your own, and also it’s dangerous to do it on your own too. Sometimes you don’t have a choice, like, like, again, I hate going to the active shooter scenario, but in a situation like that, that’s the only thing I could think of, where if you are by yourself and you have to

act and you can't wait for a backup. You got to go in there, because the guy might kill more people if you don't do anything.

P3 stated:

With a partner definitely. Because your partner sees things that you don't. And when I had my, my incident, that's exactly how it worked out for my partner and I that night. He was not aware, of the situation at all, and I'm the one that, that, I alerted him, and I, there was no time for me to like, to tell him anything.

P4 stated:

I would say definitely with a partner. Umm because there are certain things that I'm better in doing versus the other person... I would be the spokesperson, right. And my partner would be lethal, or he would be, you know, like checking if there was any danger, you know, coming my way. Why? I'll be focusing on establishing a rapport. So it's always better for safety reasons to have a partner.

P1 reported preferring a partner because of the teamwork and assistance, but also to help prevent falling into tunnel vision. P3 described preferring a partner because of the different perspectives in seeing things that the other may not. P4 also preferred responding with a partner due to people being good at different things and the ability to contribute that to the situation. Additionally, P2 preferred responding with a partner depending on the situation, "having the knowledge of like the person that's sitting next to you, and you understand how their brain works, and them understanding how your brain works makes a world of difference." Each of these responses detailed the perspectives of the participants responding to critical incidents.

Theme four is important in determining if the participants prefer responding to critical incidents with a partner or without a partner. A majority of the participants reported preferring to respond with a partner, with several subthemes emerging, such as safety considerations and teamwork in working together. P1 reported preferring a partner, as did P3 and P4. P7 reported that they “Would prefer a partner,” P8 disclosed “I prefer responding with a partner,” and P9 stated “with a partner, absolutely one-hundred percent.” With the study looking into law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner, these meaning units, along with the theme and relative subthemes, emerged as important in the findings of this study as it relates to the research questions.

Subtheme 1: Safety Considerations When Responding to Critical Incidents

Emerging as a subtheme, some of the participants mentioned safety considerations in regards to partner status when responding to critical incidents. Many participants described a sense of safety or the safety considerations when having a partner versus not having a partner. These responses from the participants were based on the responses that they had to critical incidents and their takeaways from them. The following were some of the responses from the participants that built this subtheme of safety considerations.

P9 stated, “That sense of safety, that’s 100% once you, once you’ve had a really good partner, it’s like you can kind of read each other’s minds.” P7 reported, “I would prefer a partner, just for safety issues, because you never really know what’s going to happen with that incident or any incident for that matter.” P2 described “Just having that

kind of peace of mind of like, yes, the person next to me is capable.” P3 responded, “With a partner definitely. Because your partner sees things that you don’t.”

Additionally, P6 described currently being placed on a team in which he cannot work alone, “you can’t work by yourself just because you’re doing a lot more high-risk stuff you know you’re responding to in progress calls.” These responses from the participants described the potential dangers of responding without a partner and the safety aspects that they take into consideration.

These descriptions and explanations from the participants not only described the dangers that could present when responding alone, but also the sense of safety that they can feel having a partner with them. P9 described that sense of safety having her partner, and P2 described having the peace of mind knowing the person next to him is capable. These participants’ responses described how having and not having a partner can impact the safety of response and the sense of safety they feel as well.

Subtheme 2: Opportunities for Teamwork when Responding to Critical Incidents

Emerging as a second subtheme, many of the participants mentioned opportunities for teamwork when responding to critical incidents with a partner. Participants described opportunities for helping each other complete tasks and working together as a team to handle situations. Many of these responses from participants were based on specific situations they had experienced, while others were the result of their experience with critical incidents in their entirety. Below are some of these responses from participants that built this subtheme.

P1 stated:

Definitely with a partner. Because you have to have teamwork. You have to have people helping you. It's very easy to get in tunnel vision on your own, and also it's dangerous to do it on your own too.

P8 stated:

I definitely feel like I feel better about the situation if we can, kind of like, brainstorm it on the way there and then I'm going to do this, and you're going to do this. Or if it's like, you know, especially situations like you might have to put someone in handcuffs, it's going to be a lot easier if we have two of us. Or, you know, if one of us has to render aid, the other one can use their radio, and you're not like potentially getting blood everywhere, like it's, I definitely think it's more preferable for me to have a partner.

P1 stated specifically that he believes there needs to be teamwork, while P8 describes how partners can multitask and help each other complete various tasks. P2 describes a feeling, "just having that kind of peace of mind of like, yes, the person next to me is capable," and P9 reports, "it's like you can kind of read each other's minds. You don't have to say anything. That's like, really such a blessing." Each of these responses from the participants demonstrated the teamwork and elements of working together with a partner when responding to critical incidents.

The responses from participants described the team effort that can arise from having a partner and working together. Some of the participants described working with set partners that they worked with every day, while others described working with any

partner as well. P1 described having help and teamwork with a partner, and P8 described brainstorming with a partner to make sure things get done. This subtheme emerges as important due to the partnership aspect of responding to critical incidents that this study looks into.

Theme 5: Majority of Participants Reported the Importance of Safety and Communication Between Partners

The research question aligns with the meaning units and theme five, which asked participants about their thoughts when responding to critical incidents with a partner. The majority of participants reported the importance of communicating with partners and keeping each other safe. Multiple participants explained the importance of communication between partners, such as developing plans and contributing to what needs to be done. The communication they described included before arriving on scene, such as developing plans, and while on scene, such as working together to get things done. Another aspect that participants described as particularly important is safety considerations surrounding having or not having a partner.

Table 6

Meaning Unit and Theme 5

Meaning Unit	Theme 5
<p>“So, but we just try to, you know, figure out how we’re going to do it, so that way everyone’s safe, myself, my partner, and, you know, the person we’re eventually going to make contact with.”</p>	<p>Majority of participants reported the importance of safety and communication between partners</p>

Each of the participants disclosed their thoughts when responding to critical incidents with a partner based on their experience. The average response from participants reported the importance of communicating with partners and keeping each other safe. From the participants' responses, many of them elaborated on how communication can be used and how safety can come into play as well. Below are a few such examples of this.

P3 stated:

I feel like it's always important to talk, you know. So like, when you get a call, just talk about, okay, if this is if what they're saying is true, how do you want to handle this. Like, what do you want to do? Just have some type of communication so that they're aware, and you're aware too, because sometimes you know things, things happen, and if it's with somebody that you don't know, or somebody that freezes, you know, I think that's kind of like what's hard, because, you know, if it's somebody we never worked with, if it's a life threatening situation, what are you going to do if they freeze? You know, it's your job, not just your job, your life, you know, and I think that we don't think about that.

P6 stated:

So we kind of just talk about tactics pretty much the entire time, but you won't really know how that person is going to react until we get there. So, but we just try to, you know, figure out how we're going to do it, so that way everyone's safe, myself, my partner, and, you know, the person we're eventually going to make contact with.

P8 stated:

It's much more like a team effort, and more of like a what is not being done that I need to do, or what is not being done that they can do, like, you know, at the time when we get there and it's like, you know, chaos.

P3 highlighted the importance of communicating beforehand, especially if neither knows how the other will react, such as freezing in the moment. P6 talked about tactics to help ensure the safety of those involved, including not knowing how the individual they are responding to will react when they get there. P8 described responding with a partner as a team effort and how each of them could help the other do what was not yet being done. Additionally, P1 reported, "I try to make a plan if possible." These responses from the participants not only highlighted the importance of communication between partners and the safety aspects that must be considered, but also the opportunities that can accompany it as well.

Theme five is important in the participants' descriptions of how they respond to critical incidents with partners. The average response from the participants included communicating with partners and keeping each other safe. The participants' responses included developing plans before arriving on scene, communicating during incidents to help one another, talking about tactics, and trying to make sure everyone is safe. With the study looking at law enforcement officer response to critical incidents, this theme emerged as important when considering officer response with a partner.

Summary

In Chapter 4, the data collection process and details of this phenomenological study were provided. Included in these details were the details surrounding the pilot study, as well as the settings and demographics of the interviews. Next, detailed descriptions of the data collection process were disclosed, as well as the data analysis process, which included Giorgi's data analysis method. The elements of the evidence of trustworthiness were disclosed, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, the results of the study were disclosed, detailing the responses from the participants.

Within the results, each of the participants disclosed their own unique experiences. Within these experiences, five themes emerged as significant in regard to the research questions, with four subthemes further emerging from these five themes. The themes included: 1) critical incidents as moments that can involve injury and mental components, 2) critical incidents can involve violence and psychological impacts on participants, 3) majority of participants reported being conscious of possible situations and gathering information to develop plans, 4) majority of participants preferred responding to critical incidents with a partner, and 5) majority of participants reported the importance of safety and communication. From describing what critical incidents are to disclosing preferences in partner status, each participant contributed their own experiences to create rich and informed data for the study. The results offer insight into the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. Chapter 5 will include the interpretations of the findings, in

which they are further evaluated, and the limitations of the study. It will also make recommendations for future research studies and will cover the implications of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to explore the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. Previous studies have explored various aspects of critical incident responses; however, a gap remained in the research regarding the firsthand psychological experiences of officers themselves who respond to these incidents. The qualitative, phenomenological nature of this study provided an opportunity to explore the psychological experiences of officers by gathering rich, firsthand data from them.

In the previous chapter, the results were disclosed, containing the responses from the participants. In this chapter, the interpretations of the findings will be presented, revealing my understanding of the results. This chapter revisits the theoretical foundations chosen for the study and the implications of the results. The limitations of the study are also disclosed, and recommendations are made for future studies. Finally, the implications of this study for positive social change are covered.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings during this study revealed that law enforcement officers experience various psychological responses to critical incidents, including potentially violent encounters, time-sensitive moments, awareness of potential situations, as well as safety considerations and communication with partners. Additionally, the findings of this study revealed that most participants preferred responding to critical incidents with a partner.

The data gathered in this study described detailed experiences of officers responding to critical incidents, contributing to the effort of filling the research gap.

The data were collected from nine semistructured interviews with nine participants. All participants were confirmed to be law enforcement officers in the State of Illinois and met the remaining eligibility criteria required for the study. From the data results, six themes and four subthemes emerged from the participants' responses to the semistructured interviews.

Multiple participants reported critical incidents as moments that could involve injury and mental components. Throughout the interview, the participants consulted their own experiences in their responses. P2 described critical incidents as "anything that involves death or great bodily harm." P5 mentioned specific situations, such as "anything from a, from a person attempting to commit suicide all the way up to a mass shooting, or an active shooter." P8 added that critical incidents are situations "where you have to quickly make decisions." These responses were important to this study in describing the phenomenon of critical incidents that law enforcement officers respond to.

Multiple participants reported that critical incidents could involve violence and psychological impacts on the participants themselves. P2 disclosed how he "responded to the scene of a mass shooting...that kind of opened my eyes to how dangerous this line of work can be." P4 recalled responding to "a three-year-old shot...I remember that I went outside to take a couple of deep breaths in order to calm my body down because it was such a shocking experience for me." P7 described the "after effect of a homicide scene where the mother of...children were, she was raped and killed in front of them." This

theme was relevant in exploring the various types of critical incidents officers can respond to and the psychological impacts of them.

Emerging as a subtheme to Theme 2, many participants also reported an appreciation for life after experiencing critical incidents. P1 reported, “I don’t take life, you know, for granted.” P4 mentioned “Life is very fragile, that I think that I have a deeper gratitude of my relative that are younger than me.” Going along with the theme of critical incidents that can involve violence and psychological impacts, this subtheme of an appreciation for life afterward further exemplifies the danger participants have felt during these incidents and the psychological impacts that they can have.

Most participants reported being conscious of possible situations and gathering information to develop plans when responding without a partner. P5 stated, “You obviously have to watch your own back a little more.” P2 mentioned, “We are trained to kind of consider possibilities, right. You want to be prepared.” P1 reported, “If I’m able to, I like to plan, I like to figure out what I can do.” These responses from the participants described their conscious efforts to respond to critical incidents without a partner.

Emerging as a subtheme, some of the participants described being aware of not having a partner and the availability of backup. P3 reported, “If I’m by myself, I always think about like calling for backup.” P5 mentioned, “You have to think about calling for backup, and you have to think about what you could run into alone.” P2 described an incident in which he responded alone, saying, “Backup is about four minutes away, which doesn’t seem like a lot, but it can be a long time.” These responses from

participants described the considerations of backup when responding without a partner, even considering how long it will take for backup to arrive.

Most participants preferred responding to critical incidents with a partner. P1 through P9, with the exception of P5, reported preferring to respond to critical incidents with a partner. P5 explained that he prefers responding alone since being promoted, but also reported, “When I was an officer, I had a regular partner every day, so we learned how to work together, and that was a different thing.” P1 responded, “Definitely with a partner.” P3 reported, “With a partner definitely.” P4 mentioned, “I would say definitely with a partner.” The data clearly demonstrated the participants’ preference of responding with a partner to critical incidents.

Emerging as a subtheme, many participants reported safety considerations when responding to critical incidents. P7’s thoughts on it were “I would prefer a partner, just for safety issues, because you never really know what’s going to happen with that incident or any incident for that matter.” P3 mentioned, “With a partner definitely. Because your partner sees things that you don’t.” P9 added, “That sense of safety, that’s 100% once you, once you’ve had a really good partner, it’s like you can kind of read each other’s minds.” These safety considerations described by the participants elaborate on the psychological perspectives of responding to critical incidents with and without a partner.

Emerging as a second subtheme, many participants reported opportunities for teamwork when responding to critical incidents. P1 mentioned, “definitely with a partner. Because you have to have teamwork.” P8 added, “I definitely feel like I feel better about the situation if we can, kind of like, brainstorm it on the way there.” P9 reported, “It’s

like you can kind of read each other's minds." These responses from participants described partners working together to accomplish mutual goals.

Most participants reported the importance of safety and communication between partners. P6 reported "but we just try to, you know, figure out how we're going to do it, so that way everyone's safe, myself, my partner, and, you know, the person we're eventually going to make contact with." P8 added "It's much more like a team effort, and more of like a what is not being done that I need to do, or what is not being done that they can do." P3 mentioned, "Just have some type of communication so that they're aware, and you're aware too." These responses from the participants described the importance of safety and communication between partners when responding to critical incidents.

In terms of comparing the results of this study to the existing literature, there were commonalities in the results and the literature. One such commonality was the adrenaline dump and fight, flight, or freeze response to stressful situations. Some of the participants described feeling high adrenaline, such as the fight, flight, or freeze response, fear, a difficult time breathing, and more. These descriptions from participants aligned with studies such as Keesman's (2021) on the biological conceptualizations of fight, flight, or freeze responses in law enforcement officers. Many of the participants reported the uncertainty of what would be waiting for them on the scene when they arrive. These descriptions aligned with Stenshol et al. (2023) on law enforcement officers responding under time pressures with limited information and uncertainty of outcomes.

Many participants also reported trying to develop some type of plan with as much information as possible while responding. This aligned with Hansson and Borglund's

(2024) study on law enforcement officers, which described officers' desire for preparedness and planning what they can so they are not completely caught off guard. In regard to peer support and understanding, many participants described debriefing with their partners. Some of these participants described that debriefing with partners was helpful because they understood. This aligned with Billings et al. (2021) study, which showed the participants described a sense of camaraderie and peer support in colleagues who could relate to their experiences and understand the unique job demands.

Theoretical Foundation

Two theoretical foundations were chosen for this study: Lazarus and Folkman's cognitive appraisal theory (1984) and Drennon-Gala and Cullen's social support theory (1994). The cognitive appraisal theory looks at the thought processes of individuals when faced with stressors, while the social support theory looks at the relationships surrounding individuals when faced with stressors. Both of these theories contributed to understanding the psychological experiences of officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner.

Lazarus and Folkman's Cognitive Appraisal Theory

This study used Lazarus and Folkman's cognitive appraisal theory as one of the theoretical frameworks, as it appropriately aligned with the research questions. The cognitive appraisal theory plays an important role in an individual's perception of stressful events through primary and secondary appraisals (Ali et al., 2021). Primary appraisals focus on the threats presented, and secondary appraisals focus on the availability of resources such as coping mechanisms. For this study, the cognitive

appraisal theory was used to better understand the experiences of officers being presented with threats and their responses to them.

Lazarus and Folkman's cognitive appraisal theory looks at the threat in the situation and the coping abilities of the individual to respond to the threat. Challenging situations that individuals find themselves in can become threatening if the coping resources they have are not sufficient in meeting the perceived situational demands (Jamieson et al., 2018). With the cognitive appraisal theory in mind, the interview questions were grounded in its theoretical framework. Questions included inquiring about what comes to mind when thinking of critical incidents, any critical incidents that the participants may carry with them, how these incidents impact them psychologically, and how they cope with the experiences of critical incidents.

An example of how the cognitive appraisal theory could be applied to this study could be when an officer is faced with a stressor when responding to a critical incident. This incident may be challenging at first, or it may immediately be a threat. During this event, the secondary appraisals are evaluating how prepared the officer is to handle the situation and, in turn, determining just how much of a threat is being presented in the situation.

The cognitive appraisal theory was appropriate for this study in that it attempted to identify the reasoning for different responses to stressors. The primary appraisal determines the importance and relevance of the environment or stressor in relation to the individual (Ali et al., 2021). The primary appraisal in terms of this study would refer to the importance and relevance of the environment or stressor of the critical incident in

relation to the officer responding. If the situation is determined to be relevant, then the secondary appraisal is activated to begin using coping mechanisms to help reduce any disturbing emotions (Ali et al., 2021). The secondary appraisal in terms of this study would be activated as the critical incident was determined to be relevant, in an attempt to help the officer cope and handle the threat presented to them. With this in mind, the cognitive appraisal theory was determined to be a relevant theoretical foundation for this study.

Drennon-Gala and Cullen's Social Support Theory

The second theoretical framework that emerged as important for this study was Drennon-Gala and Cullen's social support theory. The social support theory identifies social support as significantly shaping how individuals perceive and deal with the stress they encounter (Acoba, 2024). According to this theory, it makes social support, both actual and perceived, is a critical aspect of handling stress. For this study, the social support theory was used to better understand the experiences of officers responding to critical incidents regarding the social aspect of partner status.

Drennon-Gala and Cullen's social support theory looks at the social support individuals have when presented with stressors. With this theory in mind, the way in which officers handle the stressors that emerge from critical incidents could be impacted by the actual or perceived level of social support they have. The interview questions encompassed this theory with questions such as their thoughts when responding alone and responding with a partner, debriefing with partners, and preference in partner status when responding.

An example of how the social support theory could be applied to this study could be how an officer responds to critical incidents alone based on the perceived or actual social support available. This could be how the officer perceives the backup potential and resources available in that moment. It could also be how the officer perceives a partner's potential support during incidents. Post-incident, it can also play a role in how the officer perceives potential help later as well. This could be the support of coworkers, administration, friends and family, and the community or public.

The social support theory was appropriate for this study in that it attempted to account for the handling of stressors based on the relationships that surround the individual. These relationships are important not only to help an individual return to their baseline functioning but to help the individual exceed prior baseline functioning (Feeney & Collins, 2015). An officer who responds to a critical incident alone and with a partner could evaluate the stressor based on the perceived level of social support they feel they have both throughout and after the critical incident. With this in mind, the social support theory was determined to be a relevant foundation for this study.

Limitations of the Study

In this study, the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner in the State of Illinois were explored. Naturally, this study, like numerous others, contained limitations. The first limitation identified in this study is the geographical limit of Illinois for the participants. For this study, the State of Illinois was chosen as the focus; however, future studies could look at different or larger geographical locations to explore the psychological experiences

of those officers as well. Along with a larger geographical location, the size of the participant pool was also identified as a research limitation. For this study, only 9 participants were interviewed to represent the larger population of law enforcement officers in the State of Illinois. Naturally, this became a limitation in that only a small number of officers were chosen to represent a larger population.

Another limitation identified in the study was the years of service that were required for participants. The requirement to participate in this study was four years; this amount was chosen because I felt it would provide rich data and a variety of experiences from the participants. However, it should be recognized that law enforcement officers who have less than four years of experience could also contribute valuable experiences and perspectives on the phenomenon as well, especially depending on the geographical location they work. Alongside the years of service, another limitation identified may be the active status of officers. It should be noted that retired law enforcement officers could bring a wealth of knowledge on the subject matter as well.

Finally, another limitation that was identified in Chapter 1 of this study was the potential biases of the researcher. Considering each of these limitations, future studies focusing on these areas could further inform the phenomenon of the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. Notes, reflective journal entries, recordings of the interviews, member checking, and guidance from my chair all contributed to helping keep this study from any of these potential biases.

Recommendations

The primary purpose of the study was to explore the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. Throughout this process of gathering research on law enforcement response and officer experiences, it has become apparent that although there is research in this area, many more aspects need to be studied, and other aspects need updated research to be conducted. This qualitative study fills a gap in the research on the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner.

A recommendation from this study would be to expand the geographic location of the participants, examining law enforcement officers' experiences in additional states around the country, and potentially even outside the country. Each state has laws and demographics that can influence its law enforcement departments, which may create different experiences for law enforcement officers. Considering this, it is recommended that additional studies focus on other geographical locations outside the State of Illinois.

With this being a qualitative study utilizing interviews to study officers' experiences, a quantitative study would be beneficial to explore numerical and percentage aspects of these responses. This could include percentages and numerical counts on preference in responding with or without a partner, a ratio of incidents experienced alone and with a partner, ratings of comfort, and more. Such studies would provide even further data on the phenomenon of officers' experiences with critical incidents alone and with a partner.

Furthermore, research could be conducted on the different types of critical incidents that law enforcement officers experience, such as shootings, that involve death or great bodily harm. Breaking down the different types of critical incidents that law enforcement officers respond to can build additional knowledge on how officers experience these moments psychologically. For example, exploring if there are any differences in critical incidents that involve danger to the officer themselves, incidents that involve danger to their partner or other officers, incidents that involve self-inflicted danger to an individual wanting to harm themselves, or incidents that involve an individual wanting to harm another individual, and more. Each of these types of critical incidents creates different sets of circumstances that officers must navigate. A study done in such a manner would build on the research provided in this study.

Another focus area that could build on the research provided in this study is physiological monitoring, such as heart rate monitor studies or blood pressure monitors, that could help determine if there are differences in these areas when responding to different types of critical incidents, as well as responding alone and with a partner. With the psychological aspect explored in this study, a physiological exploration would build upon this area of study as well. Such a study would help inform how officers' bodies are responding under the stress of critical incidents alone and with a partner.

Upon completion of this study, it became apparent that there were many more aspects of this area that need to be studied. The gap that exists in this area of research is larger than one study can fill, making it important for additional research studies to follow. Additional studies are needed that explore the physiological, psychological,

physical, and many other aspects to create a better understanding of law enforcement response within communities and better inform laws, policies, and procedures.

Implications

During this study, the experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner were explored. Through this exploration, the officers themselves were able to give first-hand experiences from their perspectives on responses. While research has covered law enforcement duties, responses, and critical incidents, they have not covered this area of law enforcement. One of the major takeaways in the results of this study was that a majority of participants preferred responding to critical incidents with a partner.

The results of this study can provide a perspective on what officers can experience, and potentially impact laws and law enforcement departments' policies. Even if departments send two one-officer units to critical incidents, there are still gaps of time between the first unit arriving on the scene and the second unit. In addition to the safety considerations that exist, as well as the safety considerations that the participants reported, there should also be consideration for how the officers perceive and feel about responses. The results showed that participants consider multiple things when responding to critical incidents; each of these considerations should be taken into account by laws and policies. Not only can this create positive social change with officers, but it can also create positive social change in the communities they serve through safer critical incident responses by law enforcement officers.

By taking into consideration the experiences and perspectives of officers, it allows officers a voice when it comes to critical incident response. Studies can look into the physiological changes, how officers respond, psychological implications, and more. However, this qualitative study provided an opportunity to give officers themselves a voice as to how they have experienced these incidents. By providing officers with a voice, it promotes positive social change by ensuring that their stories are heard.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. This study was essential to gather information on law enforcement response to critical incidents to better inform and create positive social change within law enforcement and the safety of the public. Using a semistructured interview guide, nine participants were able to describe their personal experiences responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner. These personal experiences included what comes to mind with critical incidents, incidents they carry with them, responding with and without a partner, how they cope, and more.

The responses from the participants were analyzed, and five themes with four subthemes emerged from the collected data. The five themes and four subthemes were: 1) critical incidents as moments that can involve injury and mental components, 2) critical incidents can involve violence and psychological impacts on participants, a) appreciation for life after experiencing critical incidents, 3) majority of participants reported being conscious of possible situations and gathering information to develop plans, a) awareness

of not having a partner and the availability of backup, 4) majority of participants preferred responding to critical incidents with a partner, a) safety considerations when responding to critical incidents, b) opportunities for teamwork when responding to critical incidents, and 5) majority of participants reported the importance of safety and communication. Despite the unique range of experiences from the participants in their careers, these themes emerged from within the data collected.

The findings of this study helped to fill the gap in the literature on the responses of law enforcement officers to critical incidents. The participants provided real-life first-hand experiences that encompassed a variety of different considerations that were disclosed from their personal experiences. The findings promoted positive social change in law enforcement and the safety of communities through listening to the perspectives of the officers themselves, who are responding to provide safety within such communities. This phenomenological qualitative study was essential in giving law enforcement officers a voice to explain their first-hand experiences responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Thank you for participating in this interview. I really appreciate you giving your time. As a police officer, many things you experience in the occupation are sensitive to discuss. All your information will remain confidential, and I, as the researcher, will only use it for research purposes. Before we continue, I would like to get your verbal consent. This interview is part of the research I am doing for my Ph.D. at Walden University.

1. How long have you been a law enforcement officer?
 - a. What influenced your decision to become a law enforcement officer?
 - b. What rank position do you currently hold?
2. What were your expectations when you joined?
3. What comes to mind when you think of critical incidents?
4. Can you describe any critical incidents that you carry with you?
 - a. How do these incidents shape the way you police?
5. When you think of critical incidents you have experienced, specifically without a partner, can you walk me through your thoughts during this response?
 - a. Before arriving on the scene, what is going through your head while approaching a critical incident?
6. When responding to critical incidents, do you prefer responding to incidents alone or with a partner? Why or why not?

7. When you think of critical incidents you have experienced, specifically with a partner, what are your thoughts during this response?
 - a. After a critical incident with a partner, do you debrief about what occurred with your partner?
 - b. How does this impact you, psychologically?
8. What helps you cope with the experiences of critical incidents?
9. What other information about critical incidents do you believe would be beneficial to know?

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Interview Study Seeks Illinois Law Enforcement Officers

There is a new study about the psychological experiences of law enforcement officers responding to critical incidents alone and with a partner that could help build a better understanding of law enforcement response within communities. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences of responding to critical incidents.

About the study:

- One 45-60 minute phone or Zoom interview that will be audio-recorded only (no video-recording)
- You would receive a \$10 Amazon gift card as a thank you
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that
- identify you. Your personal information will be protected and kept confidential.

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Works as an active law enforcement officer in the state of Illinois
- Has been a law enforcement officer for 4 or more years
- Has experienced critical incidents alone and with a partner
- Is not known to the researcher, or research known to individual

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Lydia Abernethy, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during Summer 2025.