

2-10-2026

## Trauma Coping Mechanisms Among Police in Small Departments

Peter Michael Ungaro  
*Walden University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>

---

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu](mailto:ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu).

# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Peter Ungaro

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.

Review Committee

Dr. Jana Price-Sharps, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty  
Dr. Eric Hickey, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2026

Abstract

Trauma Coping Mechanisms Among Police in Small Departments

by

Peter Ungaro

MS, Kaplan University, 2015

BS, Kaplan University, 2012

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

February 2026

## Abstract

Mental health services are available to police officers, but many do not utilize these resources due to stigma, shame, and fear of job loss. This reluctance often forces officers to handle mental health issues alone, frequently leading to unhealthy coping strategies that negatively impact their well-being and job performance. While advancements in mental health support exist, they primarily serve larger departments, leaving the needs of small departments largely unmet. The foundation of the study was rooted in resilience theory, which holds that the impact of trauma on an individual is determined not by the event itself but by the coping mechanisms they employ. This research study examined the coping strategies of male police officers in small departments in Iowa through semi-structured interviews with 10 active-duty officers. Inductive coding of the data revealed four key themes: avoidance, use of alcohol, coping mechanism failure, and fear of community knowing their struggles. Understanding the unique challenges these officers face may inform the development of more effective support systems tailored to their specific mental health needs.

Trauma Coping Mechanisms Among Police in Small Departments

by

Peter Michael Ungaro

MS, Kaplan University, 2015

BS, Kaplan University 2012

Proposal Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

February 2026

## Dedication

I want to dedicate this dissertation, first and foremost, to my beloved grandmother, Dr. Gretchen Schreffler. Although she is no longer here to witness this significant milestone in my life, her influence has been a guiding force throughout my journey. She embraced the role of a second parent with unwavering love and dedication, providing me with invaluable wisdom and encouragement when I needed it most. Her sacrifices and belief in my potential have profoundly shaped my aspirations, and I wish she could see how her legacy continues to thrive in my accomplishments.

Additionally, I would like to dedicate this work to my family, whose steadfast support has been my anchor during this long and winding process. Their encouragement through the various challenges and triumphs I have faced has been nothing short of extraordinary. I am deeply grateful for their patience, understanding, and unwavering belief in me, which have carried me through the trials and tribulations along this path to achievement. This dissertation is as much theirs as it is mine.

## Acknowledgments

First, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. His unwavering guidance and support have been my anchor throughout this journey. It is through His strength and wisdom that I have been able to achieve this milestone. I hope that my efforts will not only fulfill my personal goals but also fulfill the mission that he has for me.

Second, I would like to express my gratitude to my chair, Dr. Jana Price-Sharps. Her unwavering support and expert guidance throughout this academic journey have been invaluable. Dr. Price-Sharps has a remarkable ability to inspire and motivate her students, and her commitment to helping individuals achieve their goals truly sets her apart. I have greatly benefited from her insights and encouragement, which have propelled me to strive for excellence.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to my committee member, Dr. Eric Hickey. His thoughtful advice and constructive feedback have played a crucial role in shaping my work. Dr. Hickey consistently challenged me to push my boundaries and aim for the highest standards of quality in my research. His influence has not only enriched my academic experience but has also equipped me with the skills necessary for future success.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Background .....	2
Problem Statement.....	5
Purpose of the Study .....	6
Research Questions.....	6
Theoretical and/or Conceptual Framework for the Study.....	7
Nature of the Study.....	7
Definitions.....	8
Assumptions .....	8
Scope and Delimitations .....	9
Limitations .....	9
Significance.....	9
Summary .....	10
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	12
Introduction .....	12
Literature Search Strategy.....	13
Theoretical Foundation.....	14
Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts .....	16
Law Enforcement Stressors .....	16
Traumatic Events .....	20

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder .....	23
Coping Mechanisms.....	26
Small Police Departments .....	33
Summary and Conclusions.....	36
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	38
Introduction .....	38
Research Design and Rationale .....	39
Role of the Researcher .....	40
Methodology .....	41
Participant Selection Logic.....	41
Instrumentation .....	41
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection.....	41
Data Analysis Plan .....	44
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	44
Credibility.....	44
Transferability.....	45
Dependability.....	45
Confirmability.....	46
Ethical Procedures .....	47
Summary .....	48
Chapter 4: Results.....	50
Introduction .....	50

Setting .....	50
Demographics.....	51
Data Collection.....	51
Data Analysis .....	52
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	53
Credibility.....	53
Transferability.....	54
Dependability.....	54
Confirmability.....	55
Results.....	55
Summary .....	66
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	69
Introduction.....	69
Interpretation of the Findings.....	69
Avoidance.....	70
Use of Alcohol.....	73
Coping Mechanism Failure .....	74
Fear of Community Knowing.....	76
Limitations of the Study.....	79
Recommendations.....	80
Implications.....	80
Conclusion.....	82

References.....	84
Appendix: Invitation to Participate .....	103

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

In law enforcement, police officers contend with one of the most demanding and stressful professions. Research conducted by Violanti et al. (2017) has shown that they are routinely exposed to potentially traumatic events, often in unpredictable circumstances (Baker et al., 2020). A study by Chopko et al. (2015) found that, on average, a police officer will encounter 188 potentially traumatic events throughout their career. This level of exposure to traumatic events has been associated with a wide range of mental and physical health issues (Baker et al., 2023).

Although mental health services are available for police officers, these services are often not used due to mental health stigma, shame, the fear of losing their job, as well as previous negative experiences with mental health providers (Wright et al., 2021). Less than half of the police officers who require mental health treatment will actively seek out mental health services (Ridders & Lawrence, 2021).

Individuals often utilize coping mechanisms to address and manage various stressors in their lives. Coping mechanisms involve individuals' mental and behavioral strategies to confront, evade, or process stressful situations (Guerrero-Barona et al., 2021). These mechanisms can yield both positive and negative outcomes for individuals. Some coping mechanisms, known as maladaptive, can adversely affect individuals (Salinas & Webb, 2018). Examples of maladaptive coping mechanisms include excessive alcohol consumption, emotional suppression, and avoidance strategies (Salinas & Webb, 2018).

This study examined the coping strategies employed by male police officers working in small police departments with fewer than ten officers. Exploring this information is crucial, as most police research has focused on large police departments (Iwama et al., 2021), even though most police officers in the United States are employed by small departments (Reaves, 2015).

### **Background**

According to Blue H.E.L.P (n.d.), in 2019, there were 255 police officers in the United States who tragically took their own lives. The following year, 2020, this distressing issue persisted, with 197 officers also ending their own lives. Policing is widely regarded as one of the most stressful professions in the United States due to the constant dangers encountered by police officers and repeated exposure to traumatic events (Frank et al., 2017). The stress of the day-to-day police work often affects the job performance and the quality of service police officers provide (Carleton et al., 2018). Chronic work-related stress experienced by police officers is linked to burnout, which can contribute to several health conditions, mental health disorders, family issues, job dissatisfaction, and emotional distress (Ermasova et al., 2020; Oliver & Meier, 2004).

Trauma can be defined as “one or more events that an individual perceives as harmful or life-threatening, usually resulting in adverse effects on the individual’s well-being” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019). Police officers face a significantly increased risk of being exposed to multiple traumatic events in comparison to the public (Kowalski, 2019). Due to the nature of their profession, police officers are often exposed to trauma as both primary victims and secondary

exposures as witnesses to others' trauma (Roach et al., 2018). Chopko et al. (2015) found that, on average, a police officer will experience approximately 188 traumatic events throughout their career, which is a stark contrast to the public they serve, who will, on average, experience one to three traumatic events over a lifetime.

Recent research has placed significant focus on understanding the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on police officers. This research has explored various aspects, including the prevalence of PTSD among police officers, the different mechanisms used by officers to cope with PTSD, as well as depressive symptoms associated with exposure to traumatic events (Steel et al., 2021). The nature of police work exposes officers to numerous traumatic events regularly, which significantly increases the probability of developing various mental health issues, including symptoms associated with PTSD (Oginska-Bulik & Juczynski, 2021). It is common for officers dealing with mental health issues to experience symptoms related to PTSD, depression, suicide, and anxiety (Oginska-Bulik & Juczynski, 2021).

Research concerning PTSD has predominantly been concentrated on examining the impact of trauma and coping strategies employed by combat veterans (Winter et al., 2018). This past research has shown that individuals in professions that encounter traumatic events often have higher rates of PTSD and other mental health conditions (Friedberg & Malefakis, 2022). Studies have indicated that while some individuals develop PTSD after experiencing perceived traumatic events, others may experience personal growth because of their experiences (Kalisch et al., 2019). Friedberg and Malefakis (2022) discovered that coping mechanisms are often utilized to manage

existing PTSD symptoms rather than being used to deal with the aftermath of traumatic events proactively.

Many assume that large or medium-sized police departments employ most law enforcement officers in the United States. However, the reality is quite different. Close to half of the police departments in the United States employ ten or fewer officers (Reaves, 2015). Additionally, 70% of small police departments serve communities with fewer than 10,000 residents (Reaves, 2015). Despite these statistics, most policing research has traditionally focused on larger police departments (Iwama et al., 2021).

The primary objective of this research study was to gain an understanding of the coping strategies employed by male police officers employed in small police departments in Iowa after experiencing traumatic events in the line of duty. Research has indicated that police officers encounter traumatic events at a significantly higher rate than the public (Marchand et al., 2015). As a result, this study provides a qualitative assessment of the specific coping mechanisms utilized by male police officers in small Iowa police departments following exposure to traumatic events.

The findings of this research may enhance our understanding of the emotional responses exhibited by law enforcement officers in small departments when confronted with traumatic events during their duties. Exploring the strategies and techniques these officers used to manage and address the traumatic events they faced provides valuable insights. It is essential to understand the positive and negative coping strategies that officers use and how these affect their well-being, job performance, and relationships with their families. The hope is that, with this understanding, proactive support strategies

can be developed to help officers effectively manage the effects of the traumatic events they encounter in the line of duty. This qualitative data may help to develop programs that positively support the mental and physical well-being of police officers in these small departments.

### **Problem Statement**

Limited qualitative research has been conducted on the different facets of police work (Richards, 2019). Although a significant amount of research data exists on the physical and mental impacts of trauma on police officers (Klimley et al., 2018), there is a lack of empirical data surrounding specific coping mechanisms utilized by male police officers in small departments in Iowa following perceived traumatic events.

Police officers may not encounter traumatic events daily, but the threat of violence, danger, or a traumatic event could happen at any time (Marchand et al., 2015). Officers are often exposed to traumatic events as both primary and secondary victims, which have been shown to have a detrimental impact on an officer's job performance as well as create strain in their professional and personal lives (Bradley, 2017). Chopko et al. (2015) found that, on average, a police officer within a medium-sized police department will experience 188 traumatic events within their career. Heyman et al. (2018) discovered that there is a direct correlation between the stigma surrounding mental health and PTSD.

One area where there is a gap in the literature is understanding the coping strategies employed by police officers in small police departments following exposure to traumatic events. While numerous studies focus on the frequency and impact of traumatic

exposures on police officers, there is significantly less information regarding the specific coping mechanisms adopted by police officers serving in smaller departments after being exposed to such events. This research explores the coping mechanisms utilized by police officers working in small Iowa police departments after exposure to traumatic events.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study explored the coping mechanisms utilized by police officers in small police departments in Iowa after exposure to traumatic events. The research helps to understand how these officers deal with the traumatic experiences they encounter while performing their duties. The study focused on a sample population from small police departments in Iowa with 10 or fewer police officers. The existing literature on how officers in small police departments cope with traumatic events is quite limited (Iwama et al., 2021).

### **Research Questions**

The following are the central research questions that were addressed in the study:

RQ1–Qualitative: What coping mechanisms do male police officers in small rural police departments in Iowa use after experiencing past traumatic events?

RQ2–Qualitative: To what extent do the participants believe that the selected coping method effectively supported them in managing the stressors resulting from the incident?

### **Theoretical and/or Conceptual Framework for the Study**

The foundation of the study was rooted in resilience theory, which holds that the impact of trauma on an individual is determined not by the event itself but by the coping mechanisms they employ. According to Van Breda (2018), resilience theories explore how adaptive coping strategies can improve social and emotional well-being. Suslovic and Lett (2024) emphasized that highly resilient people have lower occurrences of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Resilient individuals successfully navigate stress and trauma through internal and external resources, such as positive coping strategies, social support, and community services (Rutter, 2007).

The successful management of traumatic events begins with the coping mechanisms utilized by law enforcement personnel following their exposure to such events. Exploring the coping mechanisms used by police officers in small police departments offers insights into their resilience. Resilience Theory provided a theoretical basis for exploring the coping mechanisms employed by police officers in small police departments.

### **Nature of the Study**

In this study, a qualitative research approach was used to explore the emotions, attitudes, and coping mechanisms of male police officers in small Iowa police departments. To gather data for this study, in-person interviews were conducted with 10 male police officers from small departments with 10 or fewer officers. These interviews centered around exploring the specific types of traumatic events that officers encountered while on duty, the coping strategies they use following these experiences, and the extent

to which the participants believe that the coping method they have selected effectively supported them in managing the stressors resulting from the incident.

### **Definitions**

*Coping mechanism:* Conscious and adaptive strategies that individuals use to deal with stress (Di Giuseppe & Lingardi, 2023)

*Post-traumatic stress disorder:* A mental disorder that some individuals may develop after experiencing an event that they perceive to be shocking, scary, or dangerous. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

*Resilience:* An event specific to the individual, resulting from the interaction of several protective factors, which together produce a favorable adaptation in the face of hardships (Kalisch et al., 2019).

*Traumatic event:* Any distressing event that leads to significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive emotions intense enough to have a lasting negative impact on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

### **Assumptions**

The assumptions for this study were as follows: All participants were employed by a municipal, county, or state law enforcement agency. The study participants answered the questions honestly to the best of their knowledge during the interviews. All participants were currently on active duty with their respective departments. All participants were employed by a department with ten or fewer sworn officers. Participants were serving in the patrol division of the law enforcement department in

which they were employed. Participants are assumed to be very forthcoming with their responses.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This research study explored the specific coping mechanisms used by male police officers serving in small police departments after experiencing a traumatic event. The study exclusively focused on male police officers working in small police departments employing 10 or fewer officers in Iowa. Therefore, any empirical data collected from the research should not be generalized to male police officers in other states.

### **Limitations**

The primary limitation of this research study was the sample population. It is important to note that the sample population in this study was limited to male police officers in Iowa. Therefore, the findings of this research should only be applied to male officers in the state of Iowa. Additional research would be required to determine the applicability of the empirical data to female and male officers from jurisdictions outside Iowa.

### **Significance**

This research has the potential to make significant contributions to the evolving field of police psychology. By exploring the coping mechanisms used by police officers in small departments after experiencing traumatic events, this study hopes to fill a crucial gap in existing research. The incidence of trauma-induced PTSD among police officers has been the subject of a growing number of published studies.

Notably, 86.9% of police departments in the United States are classified as small departments, with fewer than 50 sworn police officers (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022). Furthermore, half of all U.S. police departments employ 10 or fewer officers (Reaves, 2015).

This study examined the coping mechanisms utilized specifically by male police officers in small rural departments. The findings may provide psychologists with information to better understand and recognize the common coping strategies used by police officers in small departments. This, in turn, could help identify the needs of these officers and contribute to developing more targeted and effective interventions.

### **Summary**

The demanding and dangerous nature of police work can present significant challenges for officers as they attempt to process their lived experiences. Whether an officer's day is routine or is shaken by a traumatic incident, the psychological, emotional, and physical impact can be profound. Research has shown that stressors associated with these traumatic events can affect both the physical and mental health of police officers (Griffin & Sun, 2017). The coping mechanisms used by police officers often play a crucial role in how they process trauma and stress, which can have a significant impact on their overall well-being (Labrague, 2024).

Numerous studies have highlighted the detrimental effects of professional identity, job stress, poor working conditions, lack of communication, emotional labor, constant exposure to trauma, role characteristics, and the absence of mental health support on the psychological and physical health of police officers (Gong, 2017; Griffin

& Sun, 2017; Schaible, 2018). However, there is a lack of information regarding the coping mechanisms utilized by male police officers in small police departments after experiencing a traumatic event. Therefore, this study provided a qualitative exploration of these coping mechanisms.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Law enforcement in the United States is one of the most stressful and dangerous occupations (Wagner et al., 2020). Law enforcement officers are exposed to a variety of traumatic events as part of their employment, which makes them vulnerable to a range of physical and mental health conditions (Lu et al., 2023). Penix et al. (2019) found that continuous exposure to traumatic incidents has an emotional impact on law enforcement personnel, which can have a detrimental effect on both their professional and personal lives.

To successfully manage repeated exposure to traumatic events within their profession, law enforcement officers rely on a variety of coping strategies to mitigate the mental, emotional, and physical impact of their work. These strategies may include adaptive coping mechanisms such as proactive planning, positive reframing, acceptance, and humor (Allison et al., 2019). Unfortunately, some officers use maladaptive coping mechanisms, which can include such things as denial, substance use, self-blame, isolation, and disengagement (Allison et al., 2019). Studies show that these maladaptive or passive coping strategies are linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and PTSD among law enforcement personnel (Allison et al., 2019).

Coping mechanisms are cognitive and behavioral responses to control, avoid, or process stressful experiences (Guerrero-Barona et al., 2021). One key concept of psychological distress caused by traumatic events is the inability to manage both internal and external stressors appropriately (Rettie & Daniels, 2021). Rettie and Daniels (2021)

provided a correlation between the use of maladaptive coping mechanisms and mental health issues in their research study.

This research study examined coping mechanisms utilized by male police officers serving in small rural police departments with staffing of fewer than ten officers following their exposure to perceived traumatic incidents. This study may be significant, as previous police-related studies have focused mainly on larger police departments (Iwama et al., 2021), and there is a need to understand the challenges faced by officers in smaller departments. To understand the coping skills employed by these officers, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1–Qualitative: What coping mechanisms do male police officers in small rural police departments in Iowa use after experiencing past traumatic events?

RQ2–Qualitative: To what extent do the participants believe that the coping method they have selected effectively supported them in managing the stressors resulting from the incident?

This chapter includes literature reviews on trauma in law enforcement, law enforcement stressors, PTSD, and coping mechanisms. Assessing how these topics relate to the law enforcement profession may provide a better understanding of how the stress from traumatic events and the coping mechanisms used by this sample population can impact the mental and physical health of these law enforcement officers.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

This research explored the coping mechanisms used by police officers in departments employing 10 officers or fewer. To gain an understanding of these issues,

the research data focused on police exposure to traumatic events, stressors in law enforcement, PTSD in police officers, coping mechanisms, and issues involving small police departments. The research was conducted through a thorough review of various databases and the collection of peer-reviewed articles using the Walden University Library. The following databases were used: Criminal Justice Periodicals, A SAGE Full-Text Collection, ProQuest, EBSCO Host, PsycARTICLES, PubMed Open Access, Directory of Open Access Journals, and SocINDEX. Search terms included but were not limited to *police stress*, *police traumatic events*, *police trauma*, *police PTSD*, *police mental health*, *trauma coping*, *coping mechanisms*, *coping mechanisms police*, *coping and police*, *PTSD Police organizational stress*, *police occupational stress*, *police work-family stress*, *posttraumatic stress police*, and *Trauma processing*. The scholarly articles chosen for inclusion in this study were published between the years 2018 and 2025. It should be noted that some relevant articles fell outside this specific date range but were nevertheless valuable for providing additional context and supporting the theoretical framework of this study.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

This study's theoretical framework was based on resilience theory, which suggests that the primary factor in determining the effects of trauma on an individual is not the experience itself but how individuals cope with it (Van Breda, 2018). Historically, resilience theory focused on how stressors and trauma were related to the development of mental health issues; however, as time progressed, researchers began to understand the positive effects of adaptive coping (Schwarz, 2018). In the 1970s, research focused on

children at risk for psychopathology found that some of the participants were having positive outcomes after being exposed to external trauma (Shean, 2015). This discovery led some researchers to explore why some children thrived despite adversity, thereby sparking the field of resilience research (Shean, 2015).

Emily Werner conducted a 40-year study of economically deprived Hawaiian children and proposed that both internal and external factors influence an individual's resilience (Werner, 1989). Internal factors included self-esteem, self-regulation, and a positive outlook, while external factors encompass support systems, positive relationships, and external resources (Werner, 1989). Rutter (1987) established the Challenge Model of Resiliency, which provides that when individuals are exposed to moderate levels of emotional stressors, they often develop coping mechanisms to overcome the experience.

In 1991, Dr. Norman Garmezy published his theory of resilience, which proposed that three factors determine one's resilience in the face of traumatic experiences (Garmezy, 1991). These factors include individual characteristics, close relationships with one's family, and positive social support systems (Garmezy, 1991). Anne Masten (2011) proposed that resilient individuals use adaptive coping strategies following adversity. Masten (2011) suggested that everyone has the potential to develop resilience by learning to use positive coping methods after experiencing adversity.

The resiliency theory framework centers on individuals' ability to process traumatic experiences and recover adaptively, or even thrive (Van Breda, 2018). This framework was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study as it explains why

some officers may struggle after traumatic experiences, while others successfully cope or even experience post-traumatic growth. This foundational concept supports the need to investigate the coping mechanisms employed by police officers in small rural departments following perceived traumatic events.

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

#### **Law Enforcement Stressors**

##### ***Law Enforcement Occupational Stress***

Police officers' mental health and well-being have recently become a significant area of research (Shane, 2021). Research finds that stress stemming from the law enforcement profession often manifests as poor job performance, decreased job commitment, and complications within an officer's personal life (Rief & Clinkinbeard, 2021). Law enforcement officers frequently encounter circumstances that can create occupational stress, including exposure to traumatic events, rotating shifts, policy changes, and criticisms from social reform groups (Baker et al., 2020; Phythian et al., 2021).

Multiple factors in law enforcement profession have been noted as contributing to job stress; some of these factors include citizen complaints, absenteeism, loss of job commitment, loss of job satisfaction, cynicism, and lack of employee retention (Lambert et al., 2022; Paoline & Gau, 2020; Rief & Clinkinbeard, 2021). Occupational stressors not only impact the job performance of police officers but also can significantly affect an officer's personal life, including divorce, separation, and domestic violence (Viegas & Henriques, 2021). Furthermore, these stressors have been shown to significantly affect

the overall health of police officers, contributing to issues such as substance abuse, heart disease, and mental health concerns (Lambert et al, 2022).

According to Bonner and Brimhall (2022), occupational stress does not affect all individuals similarly. Their study, which surveyed 203 officers from a major urban police department, revealed that female officers experience higher levels of occupational stress than male officers. Female officers reported higher occupational stress scores involving officer safety factors than male officers in the research population. In their survey of 1437 police officers, Bishopp et al. (2020) found that White officers reported higher levels of occupational stress than African American officers. Additionally, the research determined that White officers had a greater likelihood of responding with anger when experiencing stress compared to African American officers.

### ***Law Enforcement Organizational Stress***

Policing is a high-stress profession, which can result in a range of psychological consequences for police officers (Queirós et al., 2020). While performing their duties, law enforcement officers often face stressors within their organizations, including policies, procedures, schedules, and organizational culture (Bekele & Mengesha, 2023). The term “organizational stress” in the law enforcement profession pertains to stressors coming from the organizational components of police work (Purba & Demou, 2019). In their empirical review of research studies from 1990 to 2017, Purba and Demou (2019) identified organizational stressors that most significantly affect an officer’s mental well-being, including lack of administrative support, job demands, administrative pressure, and extended work hours. They found that these stressors contributed to psychological

distress, emotional exhaustion, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Purba & Demou, 2019).

Organizational stress also affects command staff as policy implementation, organizational decision-making, and daily administrative responsibilities are the primary organizational stressors they face (Baker et al., 2023). Detectives and investigators within police departments often experience organizational stress due to the procedural expectations inherent in the investigative process (Baker et al., 2023). Whereas patrol officers mainly deal with organizational stressors such as staffing issues, lack of supervisor support, and inadequate equipment (Maran et al., 2018).

Baker et al. (2023) conducted research involving 357 police officers who completed the Police Stress Questionnaire and the Maslach Burnout Inventory. The sample population consisted of patrol officers, detectives, and administrative staff holding ranks from sergeants to chiefs. The researchers found that administrative personnel experienced elevated stress due to required administrative tasks, fluctuating departmental policies, and disproportionate administrative responsibilities (Baker et al., 2023). Detectives encountered occupational stressors, which included navigating relationships with colleagues and legal proceedings (Baker et al., 2023). Patrol officers encountered organizational stressors due to inconsistent leadership styles, staffing shortages, and inherent bureaucracies (Baker et al., 2023).

In a study by Queirós et al. (2020), 1,131 police officers participated in online questionnaires designed to assess organizational stress. Their findings showed that officers identified inadequate leadership, resource scarcity, and disproportionately

assigned workloads as significant organizational stressors. Participants in this study also highlighted additional stressors, including the need to prove themselves to the administration, pressure to volunteer for overtime work, an unequal distribution of work assignments, and incompetent leadership (Queirós et al., 2020).

### ***Law Enforcement Work-Family Stress***

The combination of various stressors in law enforcement can negatively affect an officer's professional performance and personal life (Li et al., 2022). Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) defined work-family conflict as the incompatibility between work and family roles, making it challenging to fulfill one role without negatively impacting the other (Ogunbamila, 2023). Work-to-family conflict within the law enforcement profession can present itself when elements such as shift schedules and work hours interfere with family responsibilities (Ogunbamila, 2023).

Viegas and Henriques (2021) conducted research with 100 police officers, who were administered questionnaires including the Job Stress Scale, the Work-Family Conflict Scale, and the Job Satisfaction Scale. The findings revealed a direct correlation between police officers' job stress and work-family conflict. Furthermore, the research discovered a negative correlation between work-family stress and job satisfaction among police officers.

In a study by Vickovic and Morrow (2020), 641 officers completed an online survey, which revealed that work-family conflict is associated with higher job stress, lower job satisfaction, and lower organizational commitment. A study by Carleton et al. (2020) surveyed 4,441 police officers using a series of cognitive exams. The researchers

discovered a correlation between work-family stress and diminished psychological well-being, mental health, and job satisfaction, and a positive correlation with elevated job stress (Carleton et al., 2020).

A study by Duxbury et al. (2020) involving 680 police officers found that achieving work-family balance is a significant challenge for both men and women. Researchers discovered that both male and female police officers had high levels of stress shown on the Work-Interferes-With-Family assessments and moderate levels of stress on the Family-Interferes-With-Family Assessments.

### **Traumatic Events**

Experiencing traumatic events in the line of duty can significantly impact the mental well-being of police officers. These events can lead to psychological distress, which can elevate the risk of developing PTSD among enforcement personnel (Anderson et al., 2020). Research shows that approximately 70% of adults in the United States are likely to encounter one to three traumatic events during their lifetime (Benjet et al., 2016). In contrast, individuals working in law enforcement are exposed to an average of 177 traumatic events over the course of their careers (Chopko et al., 2015). In a study by Rentmeesters and Hermans (2023), researchers utilized online surveys to collect data from 1,465 police officers. The findings revealed that male police officers within their research population had encountered a range of 32 to 119 traumatic events, while female officers had experienced a range of 20 to 107 traumatic events.

In a study by Andrews et al. (2024), a web-based self-report survey was provided to 1,348 police officers to evaluate their exposure to traumatic events. The researchers

discovered that the primary or secondary traumatic experiences of the sample population included witnessing violent deaths (98.3%), experiencing physical assaults (97.9%), being involved in serious traffic accidents (97.0%), dealing with sudden deaths (96.7%), and encountering assaults with weapons (93.7%). The study participants also indicated that they had experienced direct exposure to instances of sudden violent death between 21 and 50 times, physical assault 51 times or more, serious traffic accidents 51 times or more, sudden accidental death 1 to 5 times, and assault with a weapon 1 to 5 times (Andrews et al., 2024).

A study into the effects of suicide exposure on law enforcement, conducted by Cerel et al. (2019), found that 95% of the sample population had been exposed to an average of 30 suicide scenes throughout their careers. Additionally, within the 12 months leading to the study, those officers had encountered an average of two such incidents. The researchers also found that over 20% of the sample population reported the onset of distressing nightmares after experiencing suicide exposure. The exposure of police officers to traumatic events has a direct correlation with an increased risk of suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, and various health problems (Collins & Gibbs, 2003). Repeated exposure to traumatic events has been identified as a significant risk factor for the development of traumatic stress and PTSD (Syed et al., 2020).

Police officers are exposed to traumatic events as both primary and secondary victims, which has been shown to harm job performance (Lu et al., 2024). It is crucial to understand the effects of secondary traumatic exposure on the mental health of police officers, as they often spend extended periods with trauma survivors during their job (Lu

et al., 2024). Repeated exposure to traumatic incidents and trauma victims has been shown to impact the mental health of police officers negatively (Penix et al., 2019). The emotional impact of these experiences can affect job performance, personal relationships, and reduce quality of life (Penix et al., 2019)

Secondary trauma, which has also been termed vicarious trauma, is a psychological condition that results from exposure to traumatic events experienced by others. This type of trauma is often encountered by individuals who encounter individuals who have been victimized, such as social workers, healthcare professionals, police officers, and therapists (Lu et al., 2024). Foley et al. (2022) highlighted that most of the research on secondary trauma involving law enforcement has mainly focused on the effects of cases involving child sexual abuse or exploitation. The authors point out the lack of studies surrounding police officers who engage directly with traumatized victims. Syed et al. (2020) provide that police officers who frequently interact with traumatized individuals may experience changes in their cognitive processing and memory.

According to Lu et al. (2023), previous studies have shown that around 20% of law enforcement officers have experienced high or severe levels of secondary traumatic stress. Burnett et al. (2020) conducted a study involving 605 police officers who completed online questionnaires. They found that within their sample population, shift workers experienced higher levels of secondary traumatic stress compared to those who were not shift workers. This suggests that the demands of shift work may affect the mental and emotional well-being of police officers. Gray and Rydon-Grange (2020)

found a positive association between the length of service on sexual violence offending teams and secondary traumatic stress, suggesting that the longer officers work in such environments, the more likely they are to experience secondary traumatic stress.

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

PTSD is defined as a mental disorder that some individuals may develop after experiencing an event that they perceive to be shocking, scary, or dangerous. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Lind et al. (2017) described PTSD as a mental health disorder that can occur after an individual experiences a perceived life-threatening or disastrous event. Symptoms of PTSD may include recurring memories of the traumatic event, nightmares, avoidance behavior, psychological or physiological reactions, hypervigilance, negative alterations in cognition or mood, and disturbances in sleep patterns (APA, 2013). The prevalence of PTSD is correlated with impaired social interactions (Couette et al., 2020) and frequently co-occurs with substance abuse and major depressive disorders (Renaud et al., 2021).

It is estimated that 34.4% of adults who have experienced traumatic events receive a diagnosis of PTSD (Cusack et al., 2019). According to Koenen et al. (2017), within the United States, 6.9% of the population reported having a PTSD diagnosis. Koenen et al. (2017) found that less than 50% of individuals diagnosed with PTSD have sought any mental health treatment. Researchers found that only 7% of those who did seek treatment received care from a qualified mental health professional. If PTSD is left untreated, the likelihood of developing comorbid psychiatric disorders is increased (Li et al., 2023).

Craddock and Telesco (2022) provided that past research indicates that the stress from the profession, combined with the exposure to traumatic events, significantly elevates the potential of police officers experiencing PTSD. The cumulative effect of traumatic incidents experienced by police officers is generally regarded as an inherent risk associated with the profession of policing (Soravia et al., 2021). Because of this repeated exposure, law enforcement officers are at a high risk of developing significant mental health disorders, such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Wagner et al., 2020). Graham et al. (2020) discovered a positive correlation between the duration of service in law enforcement and an increased likelihood of experiencing PTSD.

Numerous research studies have investigated the occurrence of PTSD among police officers, providing a wide range of rates from 7–32% (Wagner, 2020). Syed et al. (2020) conducted a review and meta-analysis of 506 articles involving police officers and their mental health conditions. They found that within their study, 14.2% of the police officers had been diagnosed with PTSD. Brewin et al. (2020) conducted an online research study involving 18,185 police officers. The survey involved a trauma exposure assessment designed to evaluate the mental health status of the police officers. The research revealed that within their study population, 20.6% of the officers were found to have symptoms of PTSD. In a study by Foley et al. (2024), 353 police officers who were tasked with investigating rape, sexual assault, and child abuse cases participated in an online survey. The survey comprised the Breslau-7 self-report screening scale, the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7 self-report screening scale, the Patient Health

Questionnaire-9, and the Social Support Questionnaire-6. The research revealed that 23% of the police officers exhibited clinically diagnosable levels of PTSD.

Research on gender and the prevalence of PTSD in police officers has yielded varying findings (Turgoose et al., 2017). Several studies found that there are notable gender differences, with female officers experiencing higher levels of PTSD (Brady, 2017). In a study by Tehrani (2016), 126 police officers were provided with screening questionnaires containing multiple mental health assessments. The study showed that 14.3% of male officers experienced symptoms consistent with PTSD, while 16.1% of female officers displayed symptoms consistent with PTSD (Tehrani, 2016). Other previous studies examining the relationship between PTSD and gender within law enforcement have suggested that there are no discernible differences concerning gender and the development of PTSD in law enforcement (Balmer et al., 2014; Gray & Rydon-Grange, 2019).

In recent research findings, it has been discovered that PTSD can impact various pathophysiological systems, specifically the functions of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (Bhatt et al., 2020). Desmarais et al. (2020) discovered that individuals diagnosed with PTSD exhibit cognitive impairments related to attention and working memory when compared to those without a PTSD diagnosis.

Law enforcement officers may display symptoms of post-traumatic stress differently compared to the public. Research by Bryant (2021) suggests that officers are more likely to exhibit dysphoric or numbing features than individuals in the general population. Officers who have been diagnosed with PTSD may experience higher levels

of re-experiencing, avoidance, arousal, depressive symptoms, and blunted affect than those outside of the law enforcement profession (Bryant, 2021). This provides that law enforcement officers may have a unique set of symptoms and experiences related to post-traumatic stress that differ from those of the public.

Research by Chopko et al. (2021) and James et al. (2021) has shown that these symptoms can lead to difficulties with sleep, work performance, and personal life challenges. Additionally, officers experiencing PTSD symptoms may also experience a decline in cognitive functioning (Chopko et al., 2021).

In a study by Bisson Desrochers et al. (2021), researchers compared a group of 31 police officers diagnosed with PTSD to a control group consisting of thirty police officers without PTSD. The two groups were matched on age and gender, and both were given a series of cognitive assessments. The researchers found that the police officers diagnosed with PTSD had lower performance in reasoning abilities, especially in executive functioning, verbal learning, memory, attention, and vocabulary usage, compared to the control group.

### **Coping Mechanisms**

Recent research has shown an increase in work-related stress and anxiety among law enforcement officers, leading to mental health struggles, the increased use of maladaptive coping techniques, and engaging in self-destructive behaviors (Castro et al., 2019). Coping can be defined as an individual's deliberate response to a challenging situation, either to change it or to adapt to the circumstances (Constantinou & Butorac, 2019). The fundamental purpose of coping behavior is to enable an individual to adapt to

the demands of a situation by engaging in actions that effectively manage stress or challenging life circumstances (Schaible, 2018).

When it comes to how a person responds to trauma, multiple factors influence an individual's responses. These include the coping mechanisms used to traverse the aftermath of the traumatic event, the availability of mental health support programs, prior exposure to traumas, and other mental health disorders the individual may have (Bhowmick & Mulla, 2020). Coping strategies play a crucial role in how individuals manage the stressors of the event. These strategies can be broadly grouped into two categories: adaptive coping mechanisms and maladaptive or defensive coping mechanisms. Adaptive coping involves taking an active or constructive approach to managing the stressors of the traumatic event; in contrast, maladaptive or defensive coping takes a more passive approach, often providing temporary relief without addressing the underlying issues (Fedorenko et al., 2020). It is important to recognize that while maladaptive coping may offer a short-term solution, it does not effectively address long-term challenges (Fedorenko et al., 2020).

### ***Adaptive Coping Mechanisms***

Coping is a conscious behavior of a subject in relation to the situation and is geared towards changing or adapting to it (Constantinou & Butorac, 2019). Coping behavior comprises various psychological and behavioral methods that individuals use to navigate and adapt to stress and adversity. Coping behaviors are varied and can involve a range of responses and actions designed to help individuals confront and manage the demands of specific situations. Schaible (2018) provided that coping behavior is essential

to enabling individuals to effectively confront and manage the stressors they encounter in their daily lives.

Adaptive coping mechanisms are productive strategies that people use to manage stress and anxiety caused by traumatic events. These mechanisms help individuals process and respond to stressful situations, thereby minimizing the long-term impact on their mental and emotional well-being (Valieiev et al., 2019). Ultimately, the goal of adaptive coping mechanisms is to prevent individuals from becoming overwhelmed by the stress of the traumatic event.

Adaptive coping mechanisms are problem-solving techniques designed to address or change the sources of stress. These techniques may involve engaging in activities designed to solve the issue causing the stress, dealing with the stressor if the issue cannot be resolved, seeking support from others, or taking steps to reduce the impact of the stressor (Queirós et al., 2020). These proactive approaches are designed to address the underlying causes of stress and to encourage effective stress management.

In a study by Ermasova et al. (2020), researchers surveyed 427 law enforcement officers in Illinois about the coping mechanisms they employed. The findings indicated that the officers most often reported using exercise as an adaptive coping strategy, followed by engaging in conversations with others and drawing on their spirituality. Savarimalai et al. (2023) examined the coping strategies employed by 22 police officers. The findings indicated that most of the officers in the research population used preventive coping methods, including religious rituals, prioritizing important issues while overlooking minor concerns, maintaining a positive attitude, participating in physical

fitness activities, ensuring proper grooming, and practicing meditation and yoga. The research also identified subthemes related to coping, including singing, dancing, fostering interactions with close acquaintances, getting adequate rest, reading, and confiding in trusted individuals.

Foley, Hassett, and Williams (2024) identified a significant subtheme in their research on coping mechanisms among police officers: the importance of social support. Participant 11, within their research study, provided that, “Sometimes I will, I’ll go in and offload to hubby. He’d be the one and only that I ever do. Not, not in detail, names, depth or anything like that. But just, you know, as you do, ‘oh, how was your day?’ You know, as you come in the door, ‘oh, my goodness horrific’, you know, or whatever, and it’s a 5–10-minute conversation. He doesn’t want to know; he’s not really interested. I know that, but he’s a sounding board and it’s important. And he knows that, he’s Ex Job, he gets it. He’s had some stressful tough situations, too. And I’ve you know, been there for him.”

Resilience is a multifaceted trait characterized by adaptive coping mechanisms and the ability to adapt to and manage adversity (Fung, 2020). It pertains to the process of positive adaptation during and after challenging circumstances, including the ability to manage stress effectively. This not only helps individuals recover from difficult experiences but also enables them to grow and thrive (Fung, 2020).

### ***Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms***

Maladaptive or defensive coping mechanisms are strategies that individuals use to alleviate their stress by protecting their consciousness against unpleasant or traumatic experiences. These mechanisms often arise in response to negative states of anxiety and

discomfort (Fedorenko et al., 2020). Maladaptive coping strategies hinder an individual's ability to effectively process the stressors associated with the traumatic event, which may cause individuals to continue to experience the distress associated with the traumatic event (Valieiev et al., 2019).

Maladaptive coping mechanisms often involve emotion-focused strategies that regulate, reduce, or manage distressing emotions by altering the cognitive interpretation of a stressful situation (Queirós et al., 2020). This is done without changing the situation itself. These strategies may include seeking emotional support, exercising self-control, creating distance from the situation, positive appraisals, self-isolation, and engaging in avoidance behavior (Queirós et al., 2020). Avoidance strategies frequently use substances or alcohol as coping mechanisms for dealing with stressful situations (Arble et al., 2018).

Parkes et al. (2018) emphasized detachment coping strategies as a key theme in their research. One participant explained, “I don’t like to say specifically, in detail, what I’ve seen, because somehow it makes it more real. Whereas if I don’t...I don’t say it, I don’t talk about it, that’s just something very skewed, that I’ve seen...that’s not...real, somehow.” Another described her experience as follows: “If I started to think about who this child is, where they are, what the conditions were as to how this image took place, how they were feeling at the time...If I perhaps started to turn on that empathy, then I’d find it more difficult. And that’s why I think for detachment, I can turn [empathy] on and off.”

The use of avoidant coping strategies has been found to have a positive association with increased substance use among law enforcement officers (Arble et al.,

2018). These coping strategies have been linked to poorer overall mental and physical well-being (Arble et al., 2018). The utilization of these coping mechanisms has been demonstrated to increase the impact of stress experienced by law enforcement officers (Syed et al., 2020). The use of these coping mechanisms can also lead to the development of PTSD and other mental health disorders among officers (Syed et al., 2020).

Participant 3 in the study by Foley, Hassett, and Williams (2024) illustrated how some individuals turn to alcohol as a coping mechanism for trauma faced by law enforcement officers:

The ways that I will try, and cope would be, you know, to try and go for runs, or try and do some yoga or meditation and things and try and like, err on the healthy side of it, but then often, it would be, you know, drinking.... like really craving drink when I would come back from work because alcohol then has an association of being off duty. So, when I have been hating work so much, and alcohol, the taste of alcohol is represented is associated with freedom from work that you crave it even more, which is not helpful.

Another example of turning to substances as a maladaptive coping mechanism comes from participant 11 in the Foley, Hassett, and Williams study:

I've picked up smoking again and I shouldn't have. But I think part of the reason I smoke now is not just for the nicotine, it's to be able to get out of that office once every hour, and just, you know, get away from it. And I really need to do that. And that I find helps.

Shaver and Mikulincer (2022) emphasized that hyperactivating coping mechanisms are commonly found in professions that encounter high levels of trauma. These coping strategies involve monitoring potential external threats, prompting individuals to maintain heightened vigilance in their environment. The tendency to utilize hyperactivating strategies is associated with increased anxiety (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2022). This state of hyper-alertness often leads to an exaggerated sense of external danger, causing individuals to perceive threats even when they are absent. Individuals who rely on these strategies may develop a mistrustful view of interpersonal relationships, leading them to question others' intentions (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2022).

In a study by Ermasova et al. (2020), survey data from 427 police officers revealed that several maladaptive coping strategies were prevalent. The most used included increased alcohol consumption, unhealthy eating habits, and engaging in sexual activity. Individuals who use maladaptive coping mechanisms often exhibit inflexible behavior, a tendency to deny reality, reliance on personal reasoning, a lack of consideration for others' perspectives, impulsive actions, and a belief that problems will resolve on their own (Khosravi, 2018).

In their qualitative study, Savarimalai et al. (2023) explored various maladaptive coping mechanisms exhibited by their research population. They identified several subthemes that highlight the behaviors individuals may engage in when faced with stress or adversity. Notably, participants often portrayed themselves as unwell, which could manifest as exaggerating ailments or perceived poor health. Self-isolation emerged as a prevalent theme, where individuals withdrew from social interactions and support

systems. Another subtheme was poor personal hygiene, indicating a lack of self-care that might reflect deeper emotional struggles. The study also revealed tendencies toward verbal abuse, substance abuse, and gambling.

### **Small Police Departments**

Scholarly research into policing and police culture frequently relies on data gathered from large police departments, which are often seen as representative of all law enforcement in the United States. While this approach may allow researchers to access a substantial and diverse population sample, it is important to recognize that such data might not capture the complexities faced by most police officers. Smaller departments, which constitute a significant portion of law enforcement agencies, may have different cultures, operational challenges, and community interactions that are overlooked in studies focused primarily on larger entities. Relying solely on data from large police departments could result in a skewed understanding of policing practices and officer experiences for most police officers in the United States.

It is a common misconception that most police officers in the United States are employed by large metropolitan agencies, such as the New York City Police Department, which has a workforce of over 36,000 officers. However, a closer examination of law enforcement reveals a different reality. In fact, nearly 90% of police departments across the country have fewer than 50 officers, and approximately 70% of these departments serve jurisdictions with fewer than 10,000 residents (Hyland & Davis, 2019).

Both small and large police departments are held to the same rigorous standards and encounter similar types of emergency calls. However, the nature and frequency of

those calls can vary significantly (Yanich et al., 2024). However, small police departments frequently face resource constraints, as budget limitations can limit their ability to provide training programs and updated equipment for officers, leading to knowledge and preparedness gaps (Ricciardelli, 2018). These smaller agencies often struggle with staffing shortages and fewer applicants for departmental employment (Ricciardelli, 2018).

Training presents a significant challenge for small and rural police departments, primarily because standard training programs are often designed for larger urban departments. These programs may not consider the unique circumstances, resources, and community dynamics that smaller departments face. A deputy from a small rural department provided the following information during an interview: “When our department goes to trainings in the big cities, we just sit there. What they are teaching is not relevant to our daily operations. They have departments for every job. In rural policing we see and touch it all. Any of us could be first on scene at a traffic collision or a homicide. We’re search and rescue, the coroner, the victim advocate at the scene of domestic violence, the family therapist, the sex crimes investigator, and the ones who evacuate people from wildfires” (Wooley & Smith, 2022).

Other issues often faced by police in small departments include long delays in backup officer responses, limited professional resources, understaffing, and excessive overtime. Weisner et al. (2020) reported that, due to the added challenges of small police departments, officers often face higher levels of stress than those in larger departments. The authors added that officers from small departments also experienced higher stress

due to administrative changes and public criticism of the police than their counterparts in larger departments.

Due to the structure of smaller departments, officers can often find it harder to discuss personal opinions and beliefs openly. An officer from a small department during a research interview provided the following statement: “When you are in a department with fewer officers, there is even stronger peer pressure to conform. There is little room to step up and speak out against an injustice. In larger agencies, officers can have private lives away from the department, and no one knows your business; that is not the case in rural or smaller agencies. There is a constant need to fit in and be accepted” (Wooley & Smith, 2022).

Police officers in small communities often have more personal interactions with individuals in their communities (Wooley & Smith, 2022). This increased individual connection with the community can add to the distress when critical incidents occur. An officer from a small police department, during a research project, reported the following: “There are so many calls where I’ve known the victim. I’ve responded to a fellow officer’s suicide, a SIDS death in the home of close friend, and I had to shoot and kill the drug enraged son of a Sergeant who worked in a neighboring department, and so on. I’ve lost count of them all” (Wooley & Smith, 2022).

Recruiting and retaining female police officers in small and rural police departments presents significant challenges. According to a report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2018), female officers constitute 14.1% of personnel in medium and large metropolitan police departments across the United States; their representation drops

to just 8.1% in small and rural police departments. Some of the issues female officers face within small police departments are emphasized by the following statement provided by a female police officer working in such an environment:

As the only female in a rural agency, I have to act tough all the time. Even at the debriefing for a horrible incident I have to act tough. I can't get emotional because I'm surrounded by men who see it as a weakness and use it against me by acting like I'm not capable. I learned to stuff my emotions really early on the job and never talked about anything I was experiencing. Maybe that's partly the reason I developed PTSD. (Wooley & Smith, 2022)

Although most research on police and police culture has been collected from larger police departments, data from small departments are also needed. Small departments have issues and concerns that larger police departments may not have, and for this reason, along with others, expanding data collection to smaller departments is necessary.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

This literature review played a crucial role in laying the foundation for this study. It sheds light on the multitude of challenges faced by law enforcement officers. The review revealed strong correlations between workplace stress, trauma, and various mental health conditions, such as PTSD, as well as substance and alcohol abuse. The existing literature also highlighted the diverse coping mechanisms employed by officers to navigate occupational stressors, some of which may be detrimental to their well-being (Carleton et al., 2020). Research has shown that officers who lack practical coping skills

are at a heightened risk of developing a variety of psychological issues (Carleton et al., 2020). This emphasizes the urgent need for support and interventions within law enforcement agencies to safeguard the mental health of officers.

In the course of their duties, police officers frequently encounter traumatic events, not only as direct witnesses but also as indirect victims (Lu et al., 2024). Research conducted by Lu et al. (2024) has shown that these experiences can significantly impair their ability to perform their job effectively and negatively affect their mental well-being. Despite extensive research on the organizational, occupational, and work-family stress experienced by law enforcement personnel, researchers have struggled to gain a comprehensive understanding of the effects of these stressors due to myriad issues (Martin et al., 2021).

The primary objective of this research was to explore the coping mechanisms utilized by male police officers employed in small police departments with fewer than 10 officers in response to perceived traumatic incidents. This area of study is significant, as existing police research has predominantly been conducted with larger police departments (Iwama et al., 2021). Understanding the coping strategies these officers use can offer valuable insights into the unique challenges and experiences they face in smaller departments.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the coping mechanisms employed by male police officers in rural Iowa police departments after they had faced traumatic events. The focus will be on police departments in Iowa with 10 or fewer officers. This research is important because previous studies in law enforcement have primarily focused on larger police departments (Iwama et al., 2021). There is a need to understand the distinct challenges experienced by officers in these smaller departments.

Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) indicated there is an inherent risk police officers face as part of their profession, as they are continually exposed to traumatic events and violent encounters. This constant exposure to traumatic stress during their work can have a significant impact on the mental well-being of officers, which can lead to an increased risk of developing mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Soomro & Yanos, 2018).

In support of Walden University's vision of social change, this study contributes to the exploration of the coping mechanisms used by police officers in small rural police departments following perceived traumatic events. The information gained from this research may help these officers manage the stresses associated with the profession. Chapter 3 of this study provides information regarding the research design, the researcher's role, the methodology employed, considerations of trustworthiness, and concludes with a summary of the findings and implications.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The objective of this qualitative research endeavor was to explore the coping mechanisms utilized by male police officers within small Iowa police departments after experiencing a perceived traumatic event. Only certified officers that were employed on a full-time basis, on active-duty status, and employed by a department with ten or fewer officers were selected. To understand the coping skills employed by these officers, the following research question guided this qualitative study:

RQ1–Qualitative: What coping mechanisms do male police officers in small rural police departments in Iowa use after experiencing past traumatic events?

RQ2–Qualitative: To what extent do the participants believe that the coping method they have selected effectively supported them in managing the stressors resulting from the incident?

This qualitative approach was chosen for several important reasons. First, qualitative design enables exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives, fostering a deeper understanding of the meaning they attribute to these experiences. Second, using a qualitative methodology enables a naturalistic approach, yielding insights into the research topic in its real-world context.

Using qualitative measures is appealing because it allows the researcher to interact directly with and understand the participants. Qualitative research contributes to a greater understanding of social issues by exploring human experience (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Belotto (2018) suggested that researchers using qualitative measures often explore

the everyday issues that affect people's lives and seek to understand them to support their overall well-being.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The quality and integrity of research play crucial roles in determining the success or failure of any research design. The effectiveness of research is indicated by the accuracy of the information and findings it discovers. Researchers often use their expertise and knowledge to distinguish between valid and invalid research (Creswell, 2013). This involves considering the significance of the data, setting clear objectives, and identifying the research problem being explored (Creswell, 2013).

In qualitative research, the researcher's involvement is necessary in guiding various stages of the study (Roger et al., 2018). In this study, the researcher took on the role of an observer, tasked with obtaining necessary permissions and approvals, recruiting participants, conducting data collection, and analyzing interview responses to identify themes. The researcher was also responsible for safeguarding the confidentiality of all collected data and for ensuring the fair and ethical treatment of study participants throughout the research process.

It is important to note that the researcher had no prior personal or professional connections with any individuals participating in the study. To minimize potential conflicts of interest or bias, the researcher maintained a professional distance and avoided forming any personal or professional relationships with the participants. It was essential for the researcher to remain cognizant of any biases that may arise during the interviews to maintain the integrity of the research process (Karagiozis, 2018).

In this study, one of the primary ethical considerations was safeguarding individual participants' confidentiality. Establishing trust is crucial to ensure that participants feel comfortable providing honest and comprehensive answers in the in-person interviews. To accomplish this objective, the researcher provided clear assurances that all responses would remain confidential, ensuring that no identifiable information regarding the participants would be disclosed.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Within this study, a sample population was selected from multiple small police departments in Iowa, each with fewer than ten sworn officers. To maintain consistency in the officers' experiences, the sample population was limited to male officers serving in the patrol division of the participating departments.

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher employed a semi-structured interview protocol to collect data from each participant. This approach allowed for a balance between guided questions and the flexibility to explore individual respondents' insights in more depth. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, providing a convenient and accessible environment for participants.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

For this study, the participant group comprised 10 male police officers. If the selected number of candidates had not been reached, additional participants would have been selected until saturation was achieved. Participants in this study were selected using criterion sampling, which requires that all participants meet predetermined criteria. In

order to have been eligible for participation in the sample population, the officers must have met the following specific criteria: They must hold certification as a law enforcement officer from the State of Iowa, be currently employed on a full-time basis in a law enforcement role, serve in an active duty status, be employed by a department with ten or fewer sworn officers, actively serve in the patrol division of the law enforcement department that employs them, and working in a role within the patrol division. This deliberate selection process was crucial to the researcher's accurate understanding of the phenomenon under study. The recruiting process for this research was done using email to reach potential candidates.

Prior to the formal interview, the participants were provided with a Statement of Confidentiality and Informed Consent to ensure that their personally identifiable information remains private. The tools and processes employed during the interviews were designed to explore the coping strategies utilized by male police officers serving in small rural police departments in Iowa following traumatic experiences. Furthermore, the study evaluated participants' perceptions of the efficacy of their selected coping mechanisms in mitigating the stressors arising from the incidents.

In the semi-structured interview process, the researcher used a list of open-ended questions prepared in advance. The purpose of open-ended questions is to encourage detailed responses from the interviewee. The researcher also used probing questions to explore specific areas of interest and ensure that the data collected was thorough and accurate. The researcher recognized the value of the police officers' time and made every

effort to ensure time of the police officers involved and made every effort to ensure that the interview process lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

The interviews were recorded using the recording program in the online Zoom meeting software to capture all conversations accurately. The researcher also took detailed field notes to ensure the discussions were documented accurately. Prior to the interviews, all participants received an Informed Consent document outlining the use of audio recording devices and note taking.

In conjunction with the audio recordings, the researcher recorded verbal and nonverbal communication using field notes. This included observing body language, facial expressions, posture, and vocal tones. Belotto (2018) suggested that audio recordings and field notes should be used in qualitative interviews to accurately document the data being collected.

All audio recordings, field notes, and transcripts gathered during this research project will be securely stored in a locked cabinet. The researcher is the sole person with access to this cabinet. Multiple backups will be created on different devices to ensure the safety and integrity of the data. These devices will also be secured in a locked cabinet that the researcher can only access. Once the study is concluded, all documentation provided by the participants will be destroyed in accordance with university guidelines. This measure is implemented to uphold confidentiality and protect the privacy of the individuals involved in the research.

## **Data Analysis Plan**

Yin (2018) recommended that the data analysis phase of the study should begin by addressing the questions posed in the case study. During the data analysis process, the data was examined, interpreted, and coded to identify patterns and themes. Initially, line-item codes will be used for coding. A second cycle of coding was then used, which, according to Saldana (2011), involves combining codes to form categories and then combining categories to generate themes. This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the data.

Software products play a crucial role in efficiently collecting, organizing, storing, and analyzing data. In this research project, the program NVivo, a software tool for organizing and storing the data gathered from interviews, was used. The interview data, including transcriptions, field notes, and audio recordings, were carefully transcribed and then imported into NVivo for analysis and interpretation.

## **Issues of Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility**

Macnee and McCabe (2008) described credibility as the degree to which researchers can instill trust and assurance in the reliability and validity of their findings. One way to establish credibility in research is to allow participants to review and verify the accuracy and intent of the interview transcripts. This process not only empowers participants by involving them in the research process but also enhances the reliability of the findings (Lune & Berg, 2017).

This research sought to gather and accurately represent the participants' lived experiences. To enhance the credibility and reliability of the information collected, each participant received a copy of their interview transcript via email. Participants were encouraged to review their transcripts for accuracy to ensure their perspectives and narratives are accurately represented. Feedback from the participants was communicated by email. This process validates the participants' contributions and reinforces the integrity of the research findings.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the degree to which a study's results can be applied or extended to different settings, contexts, or populations beyond the specific environment in which the research was conducted (Sumari et al., 2021). A description of the study, interview process, and data analysis procedures was provided. The researcher described the phenomenon and research problems, which are elaborated upon in the literature review.

The selection criteria for research participants have been described to ensure that the research population can provide relevant and valuable insights. This selection process is designed to provide information that not only aids in developing key themes but also enhances the overall quality and depth of the findings. In addition, the researcher strives to achieve transferability by documenting all study procedures.

### **Dependability**

Dependability is a key concept in research that refers to the consistency, replicability, and stability of the research process, procedures, and findings over time. It

emphasizes the importance of obtaining reliable results that can be reproduced under similar conditions, ensuring that the research methods are transparent and well-documented. A dependable study should provide data that, when repeated, the results will remain similar, contributing to the credibility and trustworthiness of the research (Sumari et al., 2021).

The present study established dependability through an audit process that entails cross-checking interview notes, tape-recorded interviews, and corresponding transcriptions. Research participants were encouraged to review their interview transcripts. The researcher also implemented an audit trail by documenting every step of the research process. This record encompassed various aspects, including the procedures followed during data collection, the rationale for coding decisions, the analytical techniques used, and any modifications or adjustments made throughout the study. By maintaining this detailed documentation, the researcher seeks to ensure transparency in the research process, allowing for easier verification and replication of the findings.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is a fundamental principle in qualitative research that refers to the degree to which study findings are rooted in participants' perspectives and the specific research context, rather than being influenced by the researchers' biases, values, or viewpoints. (Sumari et al., 2021). To uphold the integrity and objectivity of this study, the researcher conducted a thorough review of all data gathered through interviews. This review involved sharing the collected information with the research participants, allowing

them to provide their insights and corrections to ensure that their perspectives are accurately represented so that any potential biases from the researcher are minimized.

The researcher actively reflected on his previous experiences in law enforcement, recognizing that these experiences could inadvertently shape their interpretations of the data. By staying aware of these influences, the researcher approached the analysis with an open mind, committed to representing the participants' experiences authentically and without distortion.

### **Ethical Procedures**

The interviews conducted as part of this research took place in a private home office via Zoom. Prior to each interview, participants received a comprehensive informed consent form. This document detailed the purpose of the study, the methodology employed, and the overall research approach, enabling participants to understand fully what their involvement entails. Participants were explicitly informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without justification or explanation. This emphasizes the voluntary nature of their participation and reassures them of their autonomy throughout the research process.

Participants were reassured regarding their confidentiality and anonymity. They were informed that their identities and any information they shared during the interviews would be anonymized, and a unique code would be assigned. This coding system was designed to protect their data, ensuring it remains confidential and accessible only to authorized research personnel.

It was important to acknowledge the potential risk that participants may encounter mental health challenges because of their involvement in this research. Each participant was provided with a list of mental health resources, including the national suicide hotline, county mental health services, and a listing of several private mental health providers. This information was to assist in mitigating any adverse reactions that may arise following the interview process.

All databases, electronic notes, and other digital source materials related to the study were secured using sophisticated password protection and two-factor authentication. In alignment with university guidelines, all data will be securely stored for five years to ensure confidentiality and integrity.

### **Summary**

The objective of this study was to explore the coping mechanisms utilized by police officers working in small police departments, specifically those with 10 officers or fewer, following exposure to traumatic events. Recognizing the unique challenges officers face in these smaller settings, this research sought to understand how these officers navigate and manage the psychological impact of such experiences.

A qualitative research approach was selected to enable the researcher to gather information from officers' narratives and lived experiences. This method allowed an exploration of coping strategies, underlying motivations, and thought processes that guided their choices in these situations.

Narrative methodology enhanced the depth of this study by encouraging officers to share their stories in their own words, thereby capturing the essence of their

experiences and the contexts in which these coping mechanisms develop. By focusing on individual accounts, the researcher identified the most prevalent coping strategies and the reasons for their effectiveness or ineffectiveness in helping officers deal with trauma. Through this examination, the study may contribute valuable insights into the mental health support systems needed for police officers in smaller departments.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the coping mechanisms employed by male police officers in small rural Iowa police departments after they had faced traumatic events. The focus was on police departments in Iowa with 10 or fewer police officers. Participants were also asked to share their views on whether these chosen coping strategies helped them manage the stressors associated with specific incidents. The following questions guided the research:

RQ1–Qualitative: What coping mechanisms do male police officers in small rural police departments in Iowa use after experiencing past traumatic events?

RQ2–Qualitative: To what extent do the participants believe that the selected coping method effectively supported them in managing the stressors resulting from the incident?

This chapter includes an exploration of the research setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and a summary.

### **Setting**

The data collection process for this research study commenced with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval on July 22, 2025. To recruit participants, emails outlining the study's purpose and participation criteria were distributed. Interested individuals responded to the email expressing their interest in participating in the study.

Subsequently, an informational letter and consent form were sent to these participants via

email. If they remained interested, they were required to provide their consent before any data collection could begin.

Once consent was obtained, a mutually convenient time was arranged for an online interview via Zoom. All interviews followed a consistent methodology and used a standardized set of interview questions. The duration of the interviews varied, ranging from 46 minutes to 1 hour and 12 minutes.

### **Demographics**

The study involved a sample population from multiple small rural police departments in Iowa, each with fewer than 10 sworn officers. To maintain consistency across officers' experiences, the sample population will specifically target male officers serving in the patrol division of participating departments. The officers in the sample population selected were currently serving on active duty and working in departments employing four to 10 certified officers. Officers had a range of time on duty, ranging from 3 to 30 years of law enforcement service.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process began shortly after IRB approval was received. Emails were sent to the Chiefs of Police and Sheriffs of law enforcement agencies in the State of Iowa employing 10 or fewer officers, requesting their assistance in sharing this information with the officers in their departments. The email outlined the purpose of the research study, the requirements for participation, and noted that the project was part of a doctoral degree study at Walden University.

This recruitment method proved effective in identifying individuals willing to participate in the research study. A total of 10 law enforcement officers were interviewed, while 11 expressed interests in participating. One individual consented to the study after receiving the consent form, but subsequently ceased communication. A follow-up email was sent to determine if the individual still wished to participate; however, no response was received.

The data for this study were collected utilizing the online meeting platform, Zoom. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, with durations ranging from 46 minutes to 1 hour and 12 minutes. The interviews were recorded using Zoom's built-in recording feature and subsequently downloaded to a desktop computer. These audio files, along with their corresponding transcripts, were then transferred to a flash drive for secure storage.

The data collection process was conducted in accordance with the data collection plan approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). No unforeseen or unusual circumstances were encountered during the data collection phase of this research study.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis of this research project was guided by Braun and Clark (2022), who suggest using a six-phase thematic analysis for analyzing qualitative data. The interviews were transcribed and entered into NVivo, a data analysis software package, to assist with coding and thematic development. Braun and Clarke's initial phase of data analysis involves familiarizing oneself with the collected data. This was accomplished through the repeated examination of the interview transcriptions. The second phase of

Braun and Clark's study involved initial coding of the collected data using NVivo analysis software. During this process, words or phrases were attached to similar segments of data within the transcriptions.

The third aspect of Braun and Clarke's (2022) process involves developing themes from the data provided. In this research, themes were developed by grouping similar data codes, which were then used to develop themes in the transcriptions. The fourth step in Braun and Clarke's process was to review the initial themes. The themes within this research project were first reviewed and compared with the original transcriptions to ensure they accurately represented the participants' responses and intent. Next, the clusters were examined to ensure they were cohesive with the responses provided. These responses were then reviewed to ensure that no overlap among themes occurred. The fifth step in Braun and Clarke's process involves the defining and naming of themes. Themes within this research were reviewed multiple times to ensure they accurately reflected the collected data. The final step in the Braun and Clarke process is to describe the research results. A description of the data collected is provided in the Results section.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

To maintain credibility in this research study, participants received a transcript of their interview via email for review, ensuring the accuracy of the information they provided. Each interview was conducted via Zoom, adhering to a structured format in which all predetermined questions were presented to each participant. In addition, follow-

up inquiries were frequently made to gain a deeper understanding of the responses provided. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were allowed to share any additional information they considered relevant.

### **Transferability**

The researcher has thoroughly articulated the phenomenon under investigation and identified key research problems, which have been extensively explored in the literature review. The criteria for selecting research participants have been clearly outlined, ensuring the chosen research population can provide insights that are both relevant and valuable. This careful selection process not only facilitates the replication of the study in future research but also enhances the robustness of the findings. Furthermore, I was committed to achieving transferability and meticulously documented all procedures and methodologies associated with the study.

### **Dependability**

The present study established dependability through an audit process that involved cross-checking interview notes, tape-recorded interviews, and their corresponding transcriptions. Each participant in the research was provided with a copy of their transcript and was actively encouraged to review it for accuracy and completeness.

To enhance the reliability of the findings, the researcher implemented an audit trail that documented every step of the research process. This record encompassed various critical aspects, including the specific procedures followed during data collection, a detailed rationale behind coding decisions, and the analytical techniques employed

throughout the study. Additionally, the documentation captured any modifications or adjustments made at different stages, providing insights into how the research evolved.

By maintaining detailed, systematic documentation, the researcher aimed to ensure a high degree of transparency throughout the research process. This commitment to thoroughness not only fosters trust in the integrity of the findings but also facilitates easier verification and replication by other researchers.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability in this research study was achieved by employing open-ended interview questions that enabled participants to express their unique perceptions and interpretations of specific events. Participants were provided with copies of their interview transcripts for review, allowing them to verify the accuracy of their responses.

The researcher engaged in active reflection on his prior experiences in law enforcement, acknowledging that these experiences could unintentionally influence his interpretations of the data. By remaining mindful of these potential biases, the researcher approached the analysis with an open mind, dedicated to authentically representing the participants' experiences without distortion.

### **Results**

The research question (RQ1), “What coping mechanisms do male police officers in small rural police departments in Iowa use after experiencing past traumatic events?” played a crucial role in identifying two primary emergent themes: “avoidance” and “alcohol use.” These themes surfaced as the predominant coping strategies among the officers in the study population.

It should be noted that all the participants within the sample population were required, by their department, to attend a debriefing session or seek counseling/therapy after the traumatic event. It is important to highlight that these mandated interventions were not voluntary coping methods chosen by the officers; their respective departments stipulated them in response to the traumatic incidents. As such, these obligated processes do not represent an independent coping method chosen by the individual participant. Therefore, the officers' experiences with the debriefing processes or the therapy/counseling sessions they attend are not included in this study.

**RQ 1: What coping mechanisms do male police officers in small rural police departments in Iowa use after experiencing past traumatic events?**

The primary theme that emerged among all 10 participants in this research study was avoidance. Each participant articulated their experiences in a way that underscored the various methods they employed to avoid confronting their traumatic events. Six participants reported a tendency to internalize their experiences. For instance, Participant 2 remarked, “So, um, um, but somehow, some way I can, uh, compartmentalize stuff and not have to deal with it. I don't know. Um, probably not the healthiest, but it’s the way my brain works.” Similarly, Participant 3 spoke of internalizing their experiences, saying, “It’s you swallow it down. You deal with it later. You deal with it in retirement, or you deal with it on vacation, or you'll deal with it on the weekend when you drink a six-pack.”

Participant 4 shared insights regarding the internalization of his experiences. Despite having received previous training at the law enforcement academy that

emphasized the importance of addressing and discussing traumatic experiences, he found it challenging to fully open up about them.

I didn't want to talk to anybody. When I went through the academy a few years ago, they really pushed mental health and talking about things and opening up.

That seemed like a pretty easy thing to do when I was at the academy. Then, when I came here, it became real. It became a lot more difficult to do.

Participant 6 expressed concern that he would not be able to perform his duties as a police officer if he did not internalize his experiences. He stated, "I feel like I internalized a lot of it. I feel like I had to internalize it and harden myself to be able to deal with that experience and the experiences that were going to continue to come."

Participant 9 discussed internalizing his experiences and how this process had affected his life. He commented:

Um, I, I didn't want to get up at night or go to work. I didn't want to, um, I didn't want to go to family events. I didn't want to go out in public. I didn't want to go to the store. I just didn't want to deal with what I saw.

Participant 10 discussed how he had learned to internalize and repress his experiences to cope. He stated, "I think I just learned to bury my feelings. I, I learned to just push everything down and not let anything bother me. And that's what I did. That's how I coped with it. I just pushed it down."

The four remaining participants in the study tended to avoid addressing the situation they had encountered, as they all expressed reluctance to discuss their experiences. Participant 1 remarked:

I think I just tried not to think about it at all. I, you know, I didn't want to talk about it at work. I didn't want to have anybody else talk about it. So I think, I think I just buried it deep inside and didn't talk about it. I think it was just more of, it happened and it's done and over with, and I can't change it, so I just need to move on. And that's what I think I did.

Participant 4 expressed a notable reluctance to discuss the incident, stating:

I didn't talk about it or deal with it. I didn't talk about it with my family. I mean, my daughter and I talked a little bit about how she was dealing with things, but I've never really talked about the actual call with anybody, and how I felt, and what it did, and how it made me feel, and those types of things.

Participant 7 expressed similar sentiments, stating, "I didn't want to talk to anybody. I didn't want to answer questions about it. I turned my emotions off. I didn't want to feel it anymore." Participant 8 also remarked on their reluctance to discuss the incident, saying, "I found myself internalizing, I guess you could say, a lot of the things I was dealing with. I didn't want to, I didn't want to talk to anybody about it. I didn't want to relive it."

A second prominent theme that emerged from interviews with the sample population was the inclination of some officers to use alcohol as a means of coping after experiencing traumatic events. Of the ten participants, five specifically noted that they consumed alcohol to help manage the emotional fallout from their experiences.

Participant 1 openly discussed his use of alcohol as a means to escape from the difficult experiences he faced. He remarked, "Sometimes, when we are out with people, I

um, drink to the point where I don't have to think about the shit I experienced. And, you know, I have done that at home sometimes too." Participant 9 also admitted to using alcohol to distract themselves from their feelings. "Um, I, I will freely admit that for a stretch, I, I buried my feelings in the bottle. I was, I was drinking quite a bit. I, I probably still drink at times more than I should."

Participant 4 discussed their tendency to drink excessively, noting, "I probably drink more than I should on a regular basis, which is from all, not just that call, but all the things I've been through." Similarly, Participant 7 mentioned their regular heavy drinking, stating, "I began drinking almost daily. Yeah, I was drinking a lot."

Participant 3 also mentioned utilizing alcohol as a coping mechanism, as well as incorporating it into the culture of his department. He explained:

And then, one thing I've done, I think we've done four times now, after or the night after, or somewhere close, that group thing, we have, we have what's called debrief at the chief's house. And that means I'm grilling steaks and we're having beers. So, if I can grill these guys some steaks and we can have some beers and we can just bullshit and we bullshit about the thing, it seemed to work pretty good. I know, I know I've drank too much in the past because of the job, because of, wow, my former marriage.

**RQ2: To what extent do the participants believe that the selected coping method effectively supported them in managing the stressors resulting from the incident?**

Research question 2 (RQ2), “To what extent do the participants believe that the selected coping method effectively supported them in managing the stressors resulting from the incident?” served as a critical foundation for understanding the participants' experiences and perceptions. Two significant themes emerged, including “coping mechanism failure” and “fear of the community knowing.” Together, these themes not only provide insights into the participants' experiences but also underscore the unique dynamics of working in a department of fewer than 10 officers and in a small community atmosphere.

The first theme, “coping mechanism failure,” was identified by all 10 participants, who acknowledged that their selected coping strategies for managing stressors were ineffective. Participant 2 reflected on the inadequacy of their coping strategies, stating:

Um, and I, I, I don't know how healthy it actually is or isn't. So, um, um, but somehow, some way I can, uh, compartmentalize stuff. I don't know.

Um, probably not the healthiest, but it's the way my brain works.

Participant 8 also addressed the shortcomings of his coping techniques:

Honestly, I don't think it, I don't think it worked very well for me. I think it was, I think it was just something that we did. I, I tried to like not let it bother me and, and just move on. But I still have a lot of issues I have never dealt with.

Participant 9 added:

Um, I, you know, drinking is never, never an answer and I know that, but, um, sometimes it just feels like it's, it's the right thing. And I, I'm better than I was. I, I probably still drink at times more than I should. Um, but no, I don't think, I

don't think, uh, becoming introverted and, and avoiding the world, and drinking was a very positive way to deal with those things.

The remaining seven participants discussed how the failure of their coping mechanisms affected both their personal and professional relationships. Participant 1 remarked:

I don't think it was the best way to deal with it at all, but I got through it. You know, I didn't want to, I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't want to relive it. I didn't want to, I just wanted to be over and done with and move on. And I think, I think that's what I did. Maybe not the best way, and it may cost us a relationship, or harden us a bit, but it is what we have to do with this job.

Participant 3 reflected on issues in his marriage, stating, "Looking back at things, I realize that was a bad idea. Avoiding things just makes it worse. It definitely didn't help my marriage." Participant 4 contributed:

You know, honestly, probably not the best way, but that's just how I've learned how to cope with things, is by not being able to, I mean, I've struggled for so long that it's just come to the point that that's just my norm anymore. But to answer your question, it is not a great way to deal with the stressors.

Participant 5 reflected, "I mean, looking back, it really wasn't helping me at all. I guess looking back, I just kind of pushed everybody else away. So, I don't think it really helped me at all." Participant 6 remarked, "I don't know if you would call it effective. I did what I thought I had to do. It is just part of the job, and unfortunately, it takes a toll on your family and yourself." Participant 7 expressed, "Well, I don't think it worked very

well at all. I'm, like I said, now divorced." Participant 10 spoke of the effects it had on both his personal and professional life, stating:

I don't think it's probably very productive. And I've, I don't have that much time in, but I'm starting to become one of the grumpy cops. And it's too early in my career to be doing that. And I've noticed that there's times where I think I should be a little more open and emotional with my wife, but I'm not. And I think it's because of learning to just push everything so deep down that I don't have any feelings anymore to try and live with my job.

The second theme that emerged from Research Question 2, "fear of the community knowing," centers on the profound concern officers have regarding their personal struggles with mental health, substance abuse, or family issues becoming known within the community. This issue is particularly acute in small towns, where police officers often form close-knit bonds with residents. Officers frequently know community members on a first-name basis, promoting a sense of familiarity and, at times, vulnerability.

Given this intimate relationship, all ten participants in the sample expressed apprehension about the potential fallout from exposing their struggles. They expressed concern that revealing their difficulties could lead to a loss of respect and trust from the very individuals they are sworn to protect. This concern is compounded by the belief that admitting personal challenges might undermine their authority or effectiveness as law enforcement professionals. The officers expressed that this fear not only affects their

willingness to seek help but also contributes to a culture of silence regarding mental health issues within their ranks.

In this study, five participants expressed apprehensions about public disclosure of their personal struggles, particularly in relation to their professional roles within a small community. Participant 1 encapsulated this sentiment by stating:

This is a small community, and, you know, I don't want everybody in town to know my business. I mean, it's bad enough that, you know, everybody knows what's going on in your life as it is. I don't need to air any more things out.

Participant 5 echoed similar concerns, indicating:

I think the other part of it is you don't want anybody to know we're struggling. I didn't even want my girlfriend to know. I was afraid that she'd go tell her parents who live in town, and her parents would tell somebody else, and then the neighbors would know, and then everybody would know what was going on.

The hesitancy to confide in close relationships was evident in Participant 5's reflections, which highlighted a pervasive fear of stigma and gossip within their social environment.

Participant 6 elaborated on the unique pressures associated with law enforcement in small communities, stating:

We're in a really small community where everybody knows everybody's business and it's hard enough being a police officer in the community when you know everybody and you have to make an arrest of somebody you know or you have to deal with somebody that you know that's having a mental health struggle. But for those people to be able to know how you're doing or if you're struggling or if

you're drinking more than you should or if you're having problems with your wife, it makes it a million times harder to do the job.

Participant 8 reinforced this perspective by asserting:

We don't want anybody in our community to know what's going on because we have to deal with them. Um, and honestly, we know most of the people on a first-name basis in our community. Um, and we don't want them to realize that we're struggling.

Finally, Participant 9 illustrated the implications of this close-knit structure:

And one of the things you have to understand is when you're in a community as small as the one that I work in, I know everybody by name, or I've seen them or I've dealt with them. And we have that, that personal connection. And I don't know if I could do my job if everybody knew I wasn't okay.

The five other participants in this study not only expressed concern about community members' awareness of their struggles but also expressed apprehension about other officers in their department knowing about them. Participant 2 commented on this issue, saying:

But one of the biggest things is, like, you know, if I say something to my coworker, then I'm afraid he's going to go tell everybody in the department. Now everybody in the department knows, and soon everyone in town will too.

Participant 7 echoed similar worries, stating:

You know, honestly, I don't think anybody would talk about it. I don't think it would happen. I don't think in this community or in this department that people

are going to want to be open and vulnerable because of the size of the department and because of the community we live in. It's very small and people talk.

Participant 7 addressed the fear of appearing vulnerable within the social culture of a small community and a tight-knit police department.

Participant 3 also expressed concerns about both the public and others in their department knowing, stating:

In a department the size of mine, the officers are not going to talk about what they are going through or if they are struggling. We are all afraid of the public knowing that we are struggling.

Participant 4 spoke of their concerns, stating:

I think it's hard to talk about what we go through with the people we work with, especially in a small community like this, where if we talk about how we felt or what we were going through, or the nightmares we had, or the drinking we did, then it's all over town.

Participant 10 discussed the distinct operational and cultural dynamics of working within a small community and a police department. One of their primary concerns was the potential lack of trust from both their fellow officers and the community they served.

Participant 10 remarked:

In a department this small, everyone will know your issues, and then the question is, can you be trusted? Then people in your department will talk, and then people in town know. You can't do your job when people in town know your business.

You might be able to do that in a big city, but in a small community, there is no way you can do your job.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 presented the findings from the interviews conducted in this study. The focus of the research question RQ1, which asks, “What coping mechanisms do male police officers in small rural police departments in Iowa use after experiencing past traumatic events?” highlights two dominant themes: “avoidance” and “alcohol use” as primary coping strategies.

The theme of “alcohol use” emerged as a notable coping mechanism, with five participants openly acknowledging its prevalence in their lives following traumatic incidents. These officers described using alcohol to temporarily escape the stress associated with experiencing a traumatic event.

In contrast, the theme of “avoidance” resonated with all 10 participants in the study. This avoidance manifested in various forms, such as steering clear of specific situations that could trigger memories of trauma, distancing themselves from colleagues or friends to prevent discussing their experiences, and refraining from talking about the experience with colleagues or family. This coping strategy reflects a common response among those in high-stress occupations who may feel compelled to manage their emotions internally rather than openly confront their challenges.

The emphasis of the research question RQ2, which asks, “To what extent do the participants believe that the selected coping method effectively supported them in

managing the stressors resulting from the incident?” provided two dominant themes: “coping mechanism failure” and “fear of the community knowing”.

The theme of “coping mechanism failure” emerged among all 10 participants in the research study. Each participant expressed their experiences, highlighting the ineffectiveness of specific strategies they had employed to manage stress and difficult emotions. Notably, all spoke of avoidance behaviors: they would distract themselves or avoid confronting their problems, only to find that these tactics provided only temporary relief. Additionally, alcohol use was mentioned as a coping method by 4 participants who described how they initially turned to drinking to numb their feelings or escape reality, yet ultimately found that it exacerbated their struggles.

The second theme, “fear of the community knowing,” emerged from all 10 participants. This phenomenon highlights a unique characteristic of policing in small communities: the profound personal connections that exist between officers and the residents they serve. Unlike officers in larger departments, those in smaller settings often find themselves entangled in their communities’ social fabric.

As a result, many officers expressed deep concern that their struggles, whether emotional, psychological, or professional, could become public knowledge. This anxiety stems from the belief that a transparent acknowledgment of their challenges could undermine their credibility and effectiveness in their roles. Officers worried that if the community perceived them as vulnerable or flawed, it might impede their ability to perform their duties effectively.

Chapter 5 will discuss the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the coping mechanisms employed by male police officers in small Iowa police departments after they had faced traumatic events. The focus was on police departments in Iowa with 10 or fewer police officers. Participants were also asked to share their views on whether these chosen coping strategies helped them manage the stressors associated with specific incidents. The following questions guided the research:

RQ1–Qualitative: What coping mechanisms do male police officers in small rural police departments in Iowa use after experiencing past traumatic events?

RQ2–Qualitative: To what extent do the participants believe that the selected coping method effectively supported them in managing the stressors resulting from the incident?

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Law enforcement in the United States is among the most stressful and hazardous professions (Wagner et al., 2020). Officers in this field face numerous traumatic events as part of their duties, making them susceptible to numerous physical and mental health issues (Lu et al., 2023). Research by Penix et al. (2019) indicated that repeated exposure to traumatic incidents can have a profound emotional impact on law enforcement personnel, adversely affecting both their professional responsibilities and personal lives.

Recent research has shown an increase in work-related stress and anxiety among law enforcement officers, leading to mental health struggles, the increased use of maladaptive coping techniques, and engaging in self-destructive behaviors (Castro et al., 2019). Coping can be defined as an individual's deliberate response to a challenging situation, either to change it or to adapt to the circumstances (Constantinou & Butorac, 2019). The fundamental purpose of coping behavior is to enable an individual to adapt to situational demands by engaging in actions that effectively manage stress or challenging life circumstances (Schaible, 2018).

This study's theoretical framework was based on resilience theory, which posits that the primary determinant of trauma's effects on an individual is not the experience itself but how individuals cope with it (Van Breda, 2018). Although substantial information exists on coping mechanisms used by police officers in large departments, relatively little is known about those used by officers in small police departments (Iwama et al., 2021).

Through interviews and analysis, several themes emerged, which were discussed in the previous chapter. These included "avoidance", "use of alcohol", "coping mechanism failure", and "fear of the community knowing."

### **Avoidance**

The predominant theme that emerged from Research Question 1 across interviews with all 10 participants in this study was avoidance. This finding resonates with the work of Parks et al. (2018), who highlighted that many police officers employ detachment coping strategies, including avoidance, to manage the stressors inherent in their

demanding profession. This was particularly evident in their reluctance to address the emotional challenges tied to their experiences. Many officers opted to avoid situations that might prompt reflection on past traumatic events, instead disengaging from discussions or scenarios that could evoke uncomfortable feelings. This avoidance manifested in patterns of behavior, such as withdrawing from peer support opportunities, neglecting available mental health resources, and avoiding environments where discussions about trauma could arise.

Most individuals in this research study, although recognizing that their coping methods may not have been the most effective, believed that avoidance would ultimately resolve their situation. This sentiment is illustrated by Participant 1, who stated:

I think I just tried not to think about it at all. I, you know, I didn't want to talk about it at work. I didn't want to have anybody else talk about it. So, I think, I think I just buried it deep inside and didn't talk about it. I think it was just more of, it happened and it's done and over with, and I can't change it, so I just need to move on. And that's what I think I did.

This finding is in alignment with Khosravi (2018), who found that individuals who use maladaptive coping mechanisms often exhibit inflexible behavior, a tendency to deny reality, reliance on personal reasoning, a lack of consideration for others' perspectives, impulsive actions, and a belief that problems will resolve on their own (Khosravi, 2018). Participant 3 was the outlier in the research population who believed that avoidance was only a temporary solution to the stressors. Participant 3 provided, "It's like swallowing it down. You deal with it later. You deal with it in retirement, or

you deal with it on vacation, or you'll deal with it on the weekend when you drink a six-pack.”

In the context of avoidance coping, some participants in this study expressed a tendency to withdraw from social interactions and opted for self-isolation. Participant 4 provided, “I guess I began to start isolating myself a little bit. I didn't want to be around people. I didn't want to have to deal with those things. I didn't want to deal with anybody at home.” Participant 1 also stated, “You know, I think for a little while, I just kept to myself and, you know, in my thoughts and just wanted to be by myself and deal with it on my own.” Participant 7 added, “I became very antisocial after that happened. I didn't want to be around people.”

Many participants in the research population also expressed the necessity of suppressing their feelings and emotions due to the ongoing exposure to traumatic events in their professional lives. Participant 6 articulated this sentiment well, stating, “I feel like I internalized a lot of it. I had to harden myself to cope with that experience and the ongoing challenges I would face. I think I just pushed it deep down.” Participant 1 also provided:

I think that we see a lot of really bad things in our job. And, you know, we just have to put it behind us and move on. I mean, we can't worry about every single thing that happens. And, you know, if we did, we'd never be able to do our job. So, you know, I think it's an effective way to do it.

## **Use of Alcohol**

The second theme of coping that emerged from Research Question 1 within this study pertains to the use of alcohol as a mechanism for coping with traumatic experiences among law enforcement officers. Within the specific population studied, five out of ten participants openly shared their experiences of turning to alcohol to manage the emotional aftermath of such events. Participant 9 provided, “Um, I, I will freely admit that for a stretch, I, I buried my feelings in the bottle. I was, I was drinking quite a bit. I, I probably still drink at times more than I should.” Participant 4 added, “I probably drink more than I should on a regular basis, which is from all, not just that call, but all the things I’ve been through.”

This finding resonates with the research conducted by Arble et al. (2018), which identified a significant correlation between the use of avoidant coping strategies and increased substance use among law enforcement personnel. Furthermore, the findings corroborate the research conducted by Irizar et al. (2021), which revealed that 22% of police officers were consuming alcohol in hazardous amounts, while 11% were identified as engaging in harmful use.

It was noted that some of the participants within the research population openly admitted that they were consuming alcohol to forget the events that they had witnessed and experienced. This was evident when Participant 1 stated, “Sometimes, when we are out with people, I um, drink to the point where I don’t have to think about the shit I experienced. And, you know, I have done that at home sometimes too.” Participant 7 also

resonated the sentiment, stating, “It’s a way to forget the, um, the things you, um, we’ve done. Even if just for a little bit.”

It was also noted that the use of alcohol was a part of the police culture by some of the participants within the study. Participant 3 provided:

And then, one thing I've done, I think we've done four times now, after or the night after, or somewhere close, that group thing, we have, we have what's called debrief at the chief's house. And that means I'm grilling steaks and we're having beers. So, if I can grill these guys some steaks and we can have some beers and we can just bullshit and we bullshit about the thing, it seemed to work pretty good.

This finding is in alignment with Davey et al. (2000), who provided that the consumption of alcohol by officers is a known and accepted part of the police subculture.

### **Coping Mechanism Failure**

The primary theme that emerged from Research Question 2, as gathered from interviews with all 10 participants in this study, was the inadequacy of the coping mechanisms employed by the officers to effectively manage the stressors associated with the traumatic events. It is important to note that all participants relied on maladaptive coping strategies to address their stressors following these traumatic experiences.

Although Participants 4 and 5 briefly mentioned using exercise as a coping strategy, both indicated that it was used only sporadically and inconsistently.

While the research population might perceive avoidance and alcohol use as their primary means of coping with the stressors of their profession, they all acknowledged

that these methods did not represent the most appropriate ways to address their challenges. Participant 10 stated:

I don't think it's probably very productive. I've noticed lately that I've become a lot more angry and irritable. And I've, I don't have that much time in, but I'm starting to become one of the grumpy cops. And it's too early in my career to be doing that.

Participant 5 added:

I mean, looking back, it really wasn't helping me at all. I guess looking back, I just kind of pushed everybody else away. I didn't want them asking questions. I didn't want them to know I was struggling. Even the people that were closest to me, I didn't want them to know I was struggling because I didn't want to be seen as that person.

Participant 6 confirmed this feeling with his statement:

I don't know if you would call it effective. I did what I thought I had to do. I mean it did harden me a bit and I think all the other things I've had hardened me a bit. I find myself a little bit of a harder person than when I started this job. But I think I dealt with it the way I had to at that time.

Several of those within the research population also spoke about how the use of avoidance and alcohol to cope with traumatic events had a detrimental impact on their personal relationships. About the use of avoidance as a coping method, Participant 1 stated, "So, you know, I think it's what we have to do. Maybe not the best way, and it

may cost us a relationship, or harden us a bit, but it is what we have to do with this job.”

Participant 10 speaking on the use of avoidance added:

I've noticed lately that 've become a lot more angry and irritable. And I've noticed that there's times where I think I should be a little more open and emotional with my wife, but I'm not. And I think it's because of learning to just push everything so deep down that I don't have any feelings anymore to try and live with my job.

The sentiment of selected coping methods having a detrimental impact on personal relationships was also noted in those who chose to use alcohol as a coping method. An example of this is provided by Participant 7, who stated:

Well, I don't think it worked very well at all. I'm, like I said, I'm now divorced. I, I, I probably still drink more than I should on a, once in a while, but I deal with things. I have a lot of stress. I have anxiety.

Participant 1 also provided the following statement on the subject: “Drinking has caused some issues with, uh, my relationship with my wife. We have had arguments about my drinking and the problems it caused my wife and kids.”

### **Fear of Community Knowing**

The final theme that emerged from Research Question 2 was the apprehension among officers regarding the possibility of community members being aware of their mental health challenges or personal family issues. Within the study sample, all 10 officers expressed concern that, given the small size of their community, others might become aware of their struggles.

All officers in the research population engaged in open discussions about the concerns they face and the potential impact these concerns may have on their ability to perform their duties effectively, particularly if their struggles were made public.

Participant 6 spoke of this phenomenon when he stated:

We're in a really small community where everybody knows everybody's business and it's hard enough being a police officer in the community when you know everybody and you have to make an arrest of somebody you know or you have to deal with somebody that you know that's having a mental health struggle. But for those people to be able to know how you're doing or if you're struggling or if you're drinking more than you should or if you're having problems with your wife, it makes it a million times harder to do the job.

Participant 9 added:

And one of the things you have to understand is when you're in a community as small as the one that I work in, I know everybody by name, or I've seen them or I've dealt with them. And we have that, that personal connection. And if, I don't know if I could do my job, if everybody knew I was struggling, um, it'd make it very difficult.

Another phenomenon that was spoken of by five of the officers in the sample population was the fear that if they spoke to other officers within their department, others within the community would eventually hear about their struggles. Participant 2 articulated this sentiment when he stated, "But one of the biggest things is, like, you know, if I say something to my coworker, then I'm afraid he's going to go tell everybody

in the department. Now everybody in the department knows, and soon everyone in town will too.” Participant 4 added:

I think it’s hard to talk about what we go through with the people we work with, especially in a small community like this, where if we talk about how we felt or what we were going through, or the nightmares we had, or the drinking we did, then it’s all over town.

It was also discovered that many individuals in this sample population were afraid that if they spoke to others outside their department about their struggles, members of the community would still learn about their issues. Participant 5 spoke of this stating:

I think the other part of it is you don't want anybody to know we're struggling. I didn't even want my girlfriend to know. I was afraid that she'd go tell her parents who live in town, and her parents would tell somebody else, and then the neighbors would know, and then everybody would know what was going on.

Participant 7 also spoke about this and stated:

You know, honestly, I don't think anybody would talk about it. I don't think it would happen. I don't think in this community or in this department that people are going to want to be open and vulnerable because of the size of the department and because of the community we live in. It's very small, and people talk.

Some members of this sample population also spoke about feeling unable to seek help for their struggles due to fear of others in the community discovering their issues.

Participant 1 spoke about these concerns, stating:

You know, if somebody in town has an issue or is going through a divorce, everybody knows about it. If anybody in the department's having problems, everybody knows about it, so being able to talk about things or go get help if you're struggling is not easy to do here because everybody's going to find out your business, and I guess that's what makes it so tough is, you know, we're in such a small community that even if we go outside to another area to get assistance, we're afraid everybody's going to find out, and that's the last thing any of us want.

Participant 4 also spoke of these concerns when they stated:

When somebody's struggling in the community or in the county, everybody knows about it. And it's the same thing if the law enforcement officer's struggling. Everybody's going to know about it, and nobody wants that. It just makes it harder for us to get help, I think.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The primary limitations of this research study involve the sample population. The first limitation is that the sample consists solely of male police officers, which means the findings cannot be generalized to female officers in similarly sized police departments. To extend these findings to female populations, separate research would need to be conducted that includes female officers.

The second limitation concerns the sample size of the research population, which achieved saturation with 10 participants. As a result, it is difficult to generalize the findings to all male officers in comparable-sized police departments. Additionally, the

sample population was exclusively drawn from officers within the State of Iowa. Therefore, further research is necessary in other geographic regions to enable generalization of findings beyond Iowa.

### **Recommendations**

The initial recommendation for future research is to broaden the sample population. Expanding the study to include regions beyond the State of Iowa would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the coping mechanisms employed by police officers in departments with fewer than 10 officers. This approach would facilitate a comparative analysis of findings from this study alongside those from other research.

The second recommendation is to conduct similar research focused on female police officers from departments with fewer than 10 officers. Bonner and Brimhall (2022) indicate that male and female officers commonly experience and cope with trauma in distinct ways. This insight may be crucial for assessing the needs of both male and female police officers in smaller departments.

Finally, it is essential to research effective methods for providing mental health support to officers in small departments with fewer than 10 personnel, as all 10 participants in this study openly acknowledged their struggles. Given the lack of research on departments of this size, the most effective ways to address their mental health needs remain unclear.

### **Implications**

All participants in this study reported using avoidance as a coping strategy following traumatic events in their professional careers. Research indicates that the use of

maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as avoidance, can adversely affect an individual's mental health (Valieiev et al., 2019). This study highlights that male officers in smaller departments frequently rely on avoidance as a coping mechanism, suggesting they may cope differently from their counterparts in larger departments.

Another significant discovery from this research focused on the challenges faced by officers working in small communities, particularly the awareness among residents regarding the officers' struggles with mental health and personal issues. Many officers in the sample expressed difficulties in accessing mental health treatments due to concerns about the stigma associated with seeking help within their close-knit community. This highlights the urgent need to reassess the mental health support programs currently offered to officers in these smaller departments. There is a need to evaluate their effectiveness and explore the best strategies to provide the support that officers need and are willing to utilize.

Historically, most research on police officer mental health, culture, and stress has concentrated on large police departments (Iwama et al., 2021). This underscores the importance of assessing these factors separately in both large and small departments. Given that nearly half of police officers in the United States work in departments with 10 officers or fewer (Reaves, 2015), this study highlights the critical need to examine the unique challenges these officers face and to identify the most effective ways to support them.

The pivotal implication for social change arising from this research is the recognition that police officers in small communities function under distinct operational

parameters and constraints. As a result, mental health programs designed for larger departments may be less effective in smaller settings. This insight underscores the need to develop and implement mental health initiatives tailored to the unique operational circumstances of smaller departments.

The objective is to gain a deeper understanding of the unique needs of this population, which will drive the development of effective mental health programs tailored to their distinct environment. Many officers within these departments are not employing adaptive coping strategies, and the stigma associated with the small community they serve prevents them from seeking the help they require. Positive transformations occur when programs are implemented that are specifically designed to address their unique needs.

### **Conclusion**

Conducting this research was essential for gaining a deeper understanding of how male police officers in small departments, those with fewer than ten officers, navigate the unique stressors they encounter following traumatic events in the line of duty. Through in-depth interviews, participants expressed a strong willingness to share their personal struggles, illuminating the various challenges they face as they cope with their experiences.

The officers candidly disclosed the maladaptive coping strategies they often employ, such as isolation, substance use, and avoidance, highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions. Their testimonies emphasized the profound impact these

challenges can have on their mental health and overall well-being, underscoring a critical area for further exploration and the development of supportive resources tailored to the specific needs of officers in small departments.

This research revealed that the sample population operates under significantly different operational parameters and constraints compared to officers in larger departments. Factors such as limited resources, varying community dynamics, and distinct departmental cultures pose unique challenges for these officers. Consequently, there is a pressing need to reassess the support programs available to them and the methods used to deliver these resources. Customizing support services to better align with the specific needs and circumstances of officers in small departments could enhance their effectiveness and overall job satisfaction.

## References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.).
- Anderson, G. S., Di Nota, P. M., Groll, D., & Carleton, R. N. (2020). Peer support and crisis-focused psychological interventions designed to mitigate post-traumatic stress injuries among public safety and frontline healthcare personnel: A systematic review. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health*, *17*(20), 1–7.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17207645>
- Andrews, K. L., Jamshidi, L., Shields, R. E., Nisbet, J., & Carleton, R. N. (2024). Exposures to potentially psychologically traumatic events among Royal Canadian Mounted Police. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001725>
- Arble, E., Daugherty, A. M., & Arnetz, B. B. (2018). Models of first responder coping: Police officers as a unique population. *Stress and Health*, *34*(5), 612–621.
- Baker, L. D., Berghoff, C. R., Kuo, J. L., & Quevillon, R. P. (2020). Associations of police officer health behaviors and subjective well-being: The role of psychological flexibility. *European Journal of Health Psychology*, *27*(3), 98–108.  
<https://doi.org/10.1027/2512-8442/a000055>.
- Baker, L. D., Richardson, E., Fuessel-Herrmann, D., Ponder, W., & Smith, A. (2023). Police burnout and organizational stress: Job and rank associations. *Policing: An International Journal*, *46*(4), 682–693. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-01-2023-0004>

- Balmer, G. M., Pooley, J. A., & Cohen, L. (2014). Psychological resilience of Western Australian police officers: Relationship between resilience, coping style, psychological functioning and demographics. *Police Practice & Research, 15*(4), 270–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2013.845938>
- Bekele, T. M., & Mengesha, T. Z. (2023). Occupational stress in Ethiopian federal police: Validating the Organizational and Operational Police Stress Questionnaire. *Romanian Journal of Psychology, 25*(1/2), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.24913/rjap.25.1.01>
- Belotto, M. J. (2018) Data analysis methods for qualitative research: Managing the challenges of coding, interrater reliability, and thematic analysis. *The Qualitative Report, 23*(11), 2622–2633. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3492>
- Bhatt, S., Hillmer, A., Girgenti, M., Rusowicz, A., Kapinos, M., Nabulsi, N., ... Cosgrove, K. (2020). PTSD is associated with neuroimmune suppression: Evidence from PET imaging and postmortem transcriptomic studies. *Nature Communications, 11*(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-15930-5>
- Bhowmick, S., & Mulla, Z. (2020). Who gets burnout and when? The role of personality, job control, and organizational identification in predicting burnout among police officers. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology, 36*(2), 243–255. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-020-09407-w>
- Blue H.E.L.P. (n.d.). Honoring the Service of Law Enforcement Officers Who Died by Suicide. <https://bluehelp.org/>

- Bishopp, S. A., Piquero, N. L., Piquero, A. R., Worrall, J. L., & Rosenthal, J. (2020). Police stress and race: Using general strain theory to examine racial differences in police misconduct. *Crime & Delinquency*, 66(13–14), 1811–1838.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128720937641>
- Bisson Desrochers, A., Rouleau, I., Angehrn, A., Vasiliadis, H.-M., Saumier, D., & Brunet, A. (2021). Trauma on duty: Cognitive functioning in police officers with and without posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 12(1), 1–12.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2021.1959117>
- Bonner, H. S., & Brimhall, A. (2022). Gender differences in law enforcement officer stress and coping strategies. *Police Quarterly*, 25(1), 59–89.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10986111211037584>
- Brady, P. (2017). Crimes against caring: Exploring the risk of secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and compassion satisfaction among child exploitation investigators. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 32(4), 305–318.
- Brewin, C. R., Miller, J. K., Soffia, M., Peart, A., & Burchell, B. (2022). Posttraumatic stress disorder and complex posttraumatic stress disorder in UK police officers. *Psychological Medicine*, 52(7), 1287–1295.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720003025>
- Bryant, R. A. (2021). *Treating PTSD in First Responders: A Guide for Serving Those Who Serve*. American Psychological Association.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1tfw0m1>

- Burnett, M. E., Sheard, I., & St Clair-Thompson, H. (2020). The prevalence of compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction and perceived stress, and their relationships with mental toughness, individual differences and number of self-care actions in a UK police force. *Police Practice & Research*, 21(4), 383–400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2019.1617144>
- Carleton, R. N., Afifi, T. O., Taillieu, T., Turner, S., Krakauer, R., Anderson, G. S., MacPhee, R. S., Ricciardelli, R., Cramm, H. A., Groll, D., & McCreary, D. R. (2019). Exposures to potentially traumatic events among public safety personnel in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science / Revue Canadienne Des Sciences Du Comportement*, 51(1), 37–52. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cbs0000115>.
- Carleton, R. N., Afifi, T. O., Taillieu, T., Turner, S., Mason, J. E., Ricciardelli, R., ...Griffiths, C. T. (2020). Assessing the relative impact of diverse stressors among public safety personnel. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(4), 1234–1259. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17041234>
- Castro, M. C., Rocha, R., & Cruz, R. (2019). Mental health of the Brazilian police policy: Theoretical-Methodological trends. *Psicol. Saúde Doença*, 20, 525–541.
- Chopko, B. A., Palmieri, P. A., & Adams, R. E. (2015). Critical Incident History Questionnaire Replication: Frequency and severity of trauma exposure among officers from small and midsize police agencies. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 28(2), 157–161. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21996>

- Collins, P. A., & Gibbs, A. C. C. (2003). Stress in police officers: A study of the origins, prevalence and severity of stress-related symptoms within a county police force. *Occupational Medicine*, 53(4), 256–264.
- Couette, M., Mouchabac, S., Bourla, A., Nuss, P., & Ferreri, F. (2020). Social cognition in post-traumatic stress disorder: A systematic review. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 59(2), 117–138. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjc.12238>
- Craddock, T. B., & Telesco, G. (2022). Police stress and deleterious outcomes: Efforts towards improving police mental health. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 37(1), 173–182. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-021-09488-1>
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research Design: Dualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches / John W. Creswell*. (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Cusack, S. E., Hicks, T. A., Bourdon, J., Sheerin, C. M., Overstreet, C. M., Kendler, K. S., Dick, D. M., & Amstadter, A. B. (2019). Prevalence and predictors of PTSD among a college sample. *Journal of American College Health*, 67(2), 123–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2018.1462824>
- Davey, J. D., Obst, P. L., & Sheehan, M. C. (2000). Work demographics and officers' perceptions of the work environment which add to the prediction of at risk alcohol consumption within an Australian police sample. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, 23(1), 69–81. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13639510010314625>
- Desmarais, P., Weidman, D., Wassef, A., Bruneau, M. A., Friedland, J., Bajsarowicz, P., ... Nguyen, Q. D. (2020). The interplay between post-traumatic stress disorder

and dementia: A systematic review. *The American journal of geriatric psychiatry: official journal of the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry*, 28(1), 48–60. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2019.08.006>

Di Giuseppe, M., & Lingiardi, V. (2023). From theory to practice: The need of restyling definitions and assessment methodologies of coping and defense mechanisms. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 30(4), 393–395.

Duxbury, L., Bardoel, A., & Halinski, M. (2020). Bringing the badge home: Exploring the relationship between role overload, work-family conflict, and stress in police officers. *Policing and Society*, 31(8), 997–1016.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2020.1822837>

Ermasova, N., Cross, A. D. & Ermasova, E. (2020). Perceived stress and coping among law enforcement officers: An empirical analysis of patrol versus non-patrol officers in Illinois, USA. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 35(1), 48–63. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-019-09356-z>

Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2018). Full-time law enforcement employees.  
<https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2018/crime-in-the-u.s.-2018/topic-pages/tables/table-74>

Fedorenko, O., Dotsenko, V., Okhrimenko, I., Radchenko, K., & Gorbenko, D. (2020). Coping behavior of criminal police officers at different stages of professional activity. *Brain: Broad Research in Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience*, 11(2), 124–146. <https://doi.org/10.18662/brain/11.2/78>

- Filstad, C. (2022). 'If I'm not police, then who am I?': About belonging and identity in the police. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, 24(4), 417–426. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14613557221106099>
- Foley, J., Hassett, A., & Williams, E. (2022). Getting on with the job: A systematized literature review of secondary trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in policing within the United Kingdom (UK). *The Police Journal*, 95(1), 224–252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032258X21990412>
- Foley, J., Jones, F., Hassett, A., & Williams, E. (2024). Holding onto trauma? The prevalence and predictors of PTSD, anxiety and depression in police officers working with child abuse, rape and sexual exploitation victims. *Police Journal*, 97(2), 370–393. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032258X231183638>
- Frank, J., Lambert, E. G., & Qureshi, H. (2017). Examining police officer work stress using the Job Demands–Resources Model. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 33(4), 348–367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986217724248>
- Friedberg, A., & Malefakis, D. (2018). Resilience, trauma, and coping. *Psychodynamic psychiatry*, 46(1), 81–113. <https://doi.org/10.1521/pdps.2018.46.1.81>
- Fung, S. (2020). Validity of the Brief Resilience Scale and Brief Resilient Coping Scale in a Chinese sample. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(4). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17041265>
- Gong Z, Zhang J, Zhao Y, Yin L. (2017). The relationship between feedback environment, feedback orientation, psychological empowerment and burnout

among police in China. *Policing: An International Journal*, 40(2), 336–350.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-03-2016-0046>

Graham, L., Brown, N., Plater, M., Gracey, S., Legate, N., & Weinstein, N.

(2020). National Policing Wellbeing Survey 2019: Summary of evidence and insights. *Policing Research Unit, International Centre for Leadership and Followership: Durham University Business School, Durham*

University. <https://oscar.kilo.org.uk/app/uploads/2020/06/ISSUED-2019-National-Police-Wellbeing-Survey-1.pdf>

Gray, C., & Rydon-Grange, M. (2020). Individual characteristics, secondary trauma and burnout in police sexual and violent offending teams. *The Police Journal*, 93(2), 146–161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032258X19847499>

Griffin, J.D., & Sun, I.Y. (2018). Do work-family conflict and resiliency mediate police stress and burnout: A study of state police officers. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 43, 354–370. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S12103-017-9401-Y>

Guerrero-Barona, E., Guerrero-Molina, M., Chambel, M. J., Moreno-Manso, J. M.,

Bueso-Izquierdo, N., & Barbosa-Torres, C. (2021). Suicidal ideation and mental health: The moderating effect of coping strategies in the police force.

*International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(15), 8149. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18158149>

Heyman, M., Dill, J., & Douglas, R. (2018). The Ruderman White Paper on Mental Health and Suicide in First Responders.

[https://dir.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/dirnv.gov/content/WCS/TrainingDocs/First%20Responder%20White%20Paper\\_Final%20%282%29.pdf](https://dir.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/dirnv.gov/content/WCS/TrainingDocs/First%20Responder%20White%20Paper_Final%20%282%29.pdf)

- Irizar, P., Puddephatt, J. A., Gage, S. H., Fallon, V., & Goodwin, L. (2021). The prevalence of hazardous and harmful alcohol use across trauma-exposed occupations: A meta-analysis and meta-regression. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 226. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2021.108858>
- Iwama, J., McDevitt, J., & Bieniecki, R. (2021). Building bridges between researchers and police practitioners in small and midsize law enforcement agencies in the United States. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 37(2), 276–292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986221999882>
- Kalisch, R., Cramer, A.O.J., Binder, H., Fritz, J., Leertouwer, I., Lunansky, G., ... Van Harmelen, A. (2019). Deconstructing and reconstructing resilience: A dynamic network approach. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 14, 765–777.
- Karagiozis, N. (2018). The complexities of the researcher’s role in qualitative research: The power of reflexivity. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Educational Studies*, 13(1), 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-011X/CGP/v13i01/19-31>
- Kaushik, V., & Walsh, C. (2019). Pragmatism as a research paradigm and its implications for social work research. *Social Sciences*, 8(9), 255. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8090255>
- Khosravi, S. (2018). Prevention of becoming the database to a crime scene. *Postmodern Openings*, 9(2), 101–109. <https://doi.org/10.18662/po/21>

- Klimley, K. E., Van Hasselt, V. B., & Stripling, A. M. (2018). Posttraumatic stress disorder in police, firefighters, and emergency dispatchers. *Aggression & Violent Behavior, 43*, 33–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2018.08.005>
- Koenen, K., Ratanatharathorn, A., Ng, L., McLaughlin, K., Bromet, E., Stein, D., . . . Kessler, R. (2017). Posttraumatic stress disorder in the World Mental Health Surveys. *Psychological Medicine, 47*(13), 2260–2274. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0033291717000708>
- Kowalski, C. (2019). Leadership of first-responders following trauma. *Journal of Business Continuity & Emergency Planning, 13*, 81–93.
- Labrague, L. (2024). Umbrella review: Stress levels, sources of stress, and coping mechanisms among student nurses. *Nursing Reports, 14*, 362–375.
- Lambert, E. G., Qureshi, H., Nalla, M. K., Holbrook, M. A., & Frank, J. (2022). Organizational trust and job stress: A preliminary study among police officers. *Asian Journal of Criminology, 17*(1), 81–103. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11417-021-09355->
- Li, J.C.M., Cheung, C., Sun, I.Y., Cheung, Y., & Zhu, S. (2022). Work-family conflict, stress and turnover intention among Hong Kong police officers amid COVID 19 pandemic. *Police Quarterly, 25*(3), 281–309.
- Lind, M. J., Baylor, A., Overstreet, C. M., Hawn, S. E., Rybarczyk, B. D., Kendler, K. S., Dick, D. M., & Amstadter, A. B. (2017). Relationships between potentially traumatic events, sleep disturbances, and symptoms of PTSD and alcohol use

disorder in a young adult sample. *Sleep Medicine*, 34, 141–147.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleep.2017.02.024>

Lu, Y.-F., Jian, Y.-S., & Yang, C.-Y. (2024). Cumulative exposure to citizens' trauma and secondary traumatic stress among police officers: The role of specialization in domestic violence prevention. *Police Practice & Research: An International Journal*, 25(2), 113–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2023.2189593>

Marchand, A., Boyer, R., Nadeau, C., Martin, M. (2015). Predictors of posttraumatic stress disorders in police officers: A prospective study. *Psychol Trauma*, 7, 212–221.

Maria, A. S., Woerfel, F., Wolter, C., Gusy, B., Rotter, M., Stark, S., Kleiber, D., & Renneberg, B. (2018). The role of job demands and job resources in the development of emotional exhaustion, depression, and anxiety among police officers. *Police Quarterly*, 21(1), 109–134.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1098611117743957>

Maran, D. A., Zedda, M., & Varetto, A. (2018). Organizational and occupational stressors, their consequences and coping strategies: A questionnaire survey among Italian patrol police officers. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15(1), 166. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15010166>

Martin, K., Siddiqui, A., Ricciardelli, R., Lentz, L., & Carleton, R. N. (2021). Differences in mental health, help-seeking and barriers to care between civilians and sworn members working in law enforcement: A research note. *Journal of Police and*

*Criminal Psychology*, 36(3), 627–633. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-021-09437->

y

- Masten, A. S. (2011). Resilience in children threatened by extreme adversity: Frameworks for research, practice, and translational synergy. *Development and Psychopathology*, 23, 493–506. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579411000198>
- Oginska-Bulik, N. & Juczynski, Z. (2021). Burnout and post-traumatic stress syndromes in police officers exposed to traumatic events: The mediating role of ruminations. *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health*, 94, 1201–1209.
- Ogungbamila, A. (2023). Perceived work-to-family conflict and job stress as predictors of mental health of female police personnel. *Indian Journal of Health & Wellbeing*, 14(4), 413–418.
- Oliver, W., & Meier, C. (2004). Stress in small towns and rural law enforcement: Testing the assumptions. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 29, 37–56.
- Paoline, E. A., III, & Gau, J. M. (2018). Police occupational culture: Testing the monolithic model. *Justice Quarterly*, 35(4), 670–698.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2017.1335764>
- Papazoglou, K., & Tuttle, B. M. (2018). Fighting police trauma: Practical approaches to addressing psychological needs of officers. *Sage Open*, 8(3).  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018794794>
- Parkes, R., Graham-Kevan, N., & Bryce, J. (2018). ‘I put my “police head” on’: Coping strategies for working with sexual offending material. *The Police Journal*:

*Theory, Practice and Principles*, 92(3), 237–263.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0032258X18808294>

Penix, E. A., Kim, P. Y., Wilk, J. E., & Adler, A. B. (2019). Secondary traumatic stress in deployed healthcare staff. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 11(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000401>

Phythian, R., Birdsall, N., Kirby, S., Cooper, E., Posner, Z., & Boulton, L. (2023).

Organizational and individual perspectives of police wellbeing in England and Wales. *The Police Journal*, 96(1), 128–152.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0032258X211052250>

Purba, A. & Demou, E. (2019). The relationship between organizational stressors and mental wellbeing within police officers: a systematic review. *BMC Public Health*, 19, 1286. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-7609-0>

Queirós C, et al. (2020). Job stress, burnout and coping in police officers: Relationships and psychometric properties of the Organizational Police Stress Questionnaire. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(18). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17186718>

Renaud, F., Jakubiec, L., Swendsen, J., & Fatseas, M. (2021). The impact of co-occurring post-traumatic stress disorder and substance use disorders on craving: A systematic review of the literature. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.786664>

Rentmeesters, N., & Hermans, D. (2023). Posttraumatic stress disorder in Belgian police officers: Prevalence and the effects of exposure to traumatic events. *European*

*Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 14(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1080/20008066.2022.2156558>

Ricciardelli, R. (2018). “Risk it out, risk it out”: Occupational and organizational stress in rural policing. *Police Quarterly*, 21(4), 415–439.

Richards, K. (2019). Police perceptions of young people: A qualitative analysis. *Police Practice and Research*, 20, 360–375.

Ridders, W. & Lawrence, D. (2021). Mental health help-seeking experiences and service use among Australian first responders. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 73(2), 125–133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1882271>

Rettie, H., & Daniels, J. (2021). Coping and tolerance of uncertainty: Predictors and mediators of mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *American Psychologist*, 76(3), 427. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000710>

Rief, R., & Clinkinbeard, S. (2021). Examining police officers’ perceptions of stress: The role of person–environment fit. *Policing: An International Journal*, 44(6), 985–998. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-02-2021-0034>

Roach, J., Sharratt, K., Cartwright, A., & Skou Roer, T. (2018). Cognitive and emotional stressors of child homicide investigations on U.K. and Danish police investigators. *Homicide Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088767918759695>

Roger, K., Bone, T., Heinonen, T., Schwartz, K., Slater, J., & Thakrar, S. (2018). Exploring identity: What we do as qualitative researchers. *Qualitative Report*, 23(3), 532–546.

- Rutter, M. (2007). Implications of resilience concepts for scientific understanding. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1094, 1–12.
- Saldana, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research* (understanding qualitative research) (1st ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Salinas C. R., Webb H. E. (2018). Occupational stress and coping mechanisms in crime scene personnel. *Occupational Medicine*, 68(4), 239–245.
- Savarimalai, R., Christy, J., Binu, V. & Sekar, K. (2023). Stress and coping among police personnel in South India. *Industrial Psychiatry Journal*, 32(2), 247–254.  
[https://doi.org/10.4103/ipj.ipj\\_30\\_22](https://doi.org/10.4103/ipj.ipj_30_22)
- Schaible, L. (2018). The impact of the police professional identity on burnout. *Policing- An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, 41, 129–143.
- Schwarz, S. (2018). Resilience in psychology: A critical analysis of the concept. *Theory & Psychology*, 28(4), 528–541. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354318783584>
- Scott, J. C., Matt, G. E., Wrocklage, K. M., Crnich, C., Jordan, J., Southwick, S. M., . . . Schweinsburg, B. C. (2015). A quantitative meta-analysis of neurocognitive functioning in posttraumatic stress disorder. *Psychological Bulletin*, 141(1), 105–140. <https://doi:10.1037/a0038039>
- Shane, J.M. (2021). *Stress inside Police Departments*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Shaver, P. R., & Mikulincer, M. (2002). Attachment-related psychodynamics. *Attachment & Human Development*, 4(2), 133–161.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616730210154171>

- Shean, M. (2015). *Current theories relating to resilience and young people: A literature review*. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.
- Soomro, S., & Yanos, P. T. (2019). Predictors of mental health stigma among police officers: The role of trauma and PTSD. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology, 34*(2), 175–183. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-018-9285-x>
- Soravia, L., Schwab, S., Walther, S., & Müller, T. (2021). Rescuers at risk: Posttraumatic stress symptoms among police officers, fire fighters, ambulance personnel, and emergency and psychiatric nurses. *Frontiers in Psychiatry, 11*.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.602064>
- Steel, C., Tehrani, N., Lweis, G., & Billings, J. (2021). Risk factors for complex post-traumatic stress disorders in UK police. *Occupational Medicine, 71*, 351–358.
- Sumari, M., Baharudin, D., Ahmed Tharbe, I., A. Razak, N., & Md Khalid, N. (2021). Family dynamics and delinquency: Understanding the experience of female adolescents with their families. *Journal of Criminal Psychology, 11*(1), 1–20.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/jcp-06-2020-0027>
- Suslovic, B., & Lett, E. (2024). Resilience is an adverse event: A critical discussion of resilience theory in health services research and public health. *Community Health Equity Research & Policy, 44*(3), 339–343.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2752535X23115972>.
- Syed, S., Ashwick, R., Schlosser, M., Jones, R., Rowe, S., & Billings, J. (2020). Global prevalence and risk factors for mental health problems in police personnel: A

- systematic review and meta-analysis. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 77(11), 737–747. <https://doi.org/10.1136/oemed-2020-106498>
- Turgoose, D., Glover, N., Barker, C., & Maddox, L. (2017). Empathy, compassion fatigue, and burnout in police officers working with rape victims. *Traumatology*, 23(2), 205–213. <https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000118>
- U.S. Department of Justice. (2022). Local Police Departments Personnel, 2020. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh236/files/media/document/lpdp20.pdf>
- Valieiev, R., Polyvaniuk, V., Antonenko, T., Rebkalo, M., Sobakar, A. & Oliinyk, V. (2019). The effects of gender, tenure and primary workplace on burnout of Ukrainian police officers. *Postmodern Openings*, 10(4), 116–131. <https://doi.org/10.18662/po/97>
- Van Breda, A. (2018). A critical review of resilience theory and its relevance for social work. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 54(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.15270/54-1-611>.
- Velazquez, E., & Hernandez, M. (2019). Effects of police officer exposure to traumatic experiences and recognizing the stigma associated with police officer mental health: A state-of-the-art review. *Policing: An International Journal*, 42(4), 711–724. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-09-2018-0147>
- Vickovic, S.G., & Morrow, W.J. (2020). Examining the influence of work-family conflict on job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment among correctional personnel. *Criminal Justice Review*, 45(1) 5–25.

- Viegas, V., & Henriques, J. (2021). Job Stress and work-family conflict as correlates of job satisfaction among police officials. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 36(2), 227–235. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-020-09388-w>
- Violanti, J. M., Charles, L. E., McCanlies, E., Hartley, T. A., Baughman, P., Andrew, M. E., Fekedulegn, D., Ma, C. C., Mnatsakanova, A., & Burchfiel, C. M. (2017). *Police stressors and health: a state-of-the-art review. Policing* (Bradford, England), 40(4), 642–656. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-06-2016-0097>.
- Wagner, S. L., White, N., Fyfe, T., Matthews, L. R., Randall, C., Regehr, C., ...Fleischmann, M. H. (2020). Systematic review of posttraumatic stress disorder in police officers following routine work-related critical incident exposure. *American journal of industrial medicine*, 63(7), 600–615. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.23120>
- Weisner, L., Otto, H. D., & Adams, S. (2020). *Issues in Policing Rural Areas: A Review of the Literature*. Chicago, IL: Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.
- Werner, E. E. (1995). Resilience in development. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 4(3), 81–84. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.ep10772327>
- Winter, D. A., Brown, R., Goins, S., & Mason, C. (2018). *Trauma, Survival, and Resilience in War Zones: The Psychological Impact of War in Sierra Leone and Beyond*. New York: Routledge.
- Wooley, M. & Smith, S. (2022). Reaching rural police: Challenges, implications, and applications. *Crisis, Stress, and Human Resilience: An International Journal*, 4(1), 65–83.

- Wright, H. M., Griffin, B. J., Shoji, K., Love, T. M., Langenecker, S. A., Benight, C. C., & Smith, A. J. (2021). Pandemic-related mental health risk among front line personnel. *Journal of Psychiatric Research, 137*, 673–680.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2020.10.045>.
- Yanich, D. B., Gibbs, J. C., Schally, J. L., Derrickson, K., & Howard, D. (2024). Decision to adopt body-worn cameras in small and rural Pennsylvania police departments. *Policing: An International Journal, 47*(1), 16–30.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-06-2023-0082>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publishing.

## Appendix: Invitation to Participate

**Email Template****Subject line:**

Interviewing Police Officers from Small Departments

**Email message:**

There is a new study about the coping methods employed by police officers in small departments after experiencing a traumatic work event. This study may help better understand the unique experiences of police officers in departments employing 10 officers or fewer, as most research in this area focuses on officers from large departments. For this study, you are invited to describe your coping methods and experiences after facing such events.

**About the study:**

- One 30-60 minute Zoom interview that will be audio-recorded
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

**Volunteers must meet these requirements:**

- Male officers certified by the State of Iowa as law enforcement officers.
- Employed on a full-time basis
- On active-duty status.
- Working in the patrol division.
- Employed in a department with 10 or fewer officers.
- Experienced a traumatic event while on duty.
- Processed the event with a qualified professional. Examples may include a CISM debriefing, a mental health counselor, or a department therapist.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Pete Ungaro, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during July-August.

Please email XXXXXX@waldenu.edu to let the researcher know of your interest. You

are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested.