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Shift Work and Shift Change and Police Officers' Subjective Well-Being

Macey Silano
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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Macey R. Silano

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

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Walden University
2026

Abstract

Shift Work and Shift Change and Police Officers' Subjective Well-Being

by

Macey R. Silano

MA, Walden University, 2025

MA, Walden University, 2021

BS, Walden University, 2019

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Forensic Psychology

Walden University

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of police officers working second and third shifts and how these schedules impacted their subjective well-being, mental health, relationships, and life satisfaction. This study addressed an important research problem because limited research has examined how night shifts and shift changes impact police officers' well-being. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how police officers experienced shift work and shift changes while working second and third shifts and how they made meaning of these experiences in relation to subjective well-being. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study was grounded in restorative rest and tactical stamina theory and a job demands-resources lens rooted in social support theory. The research question asked: What are the lived experiences of officers working second and third shifts regarding the impact of shift work on their subjective well-being? Data was collected through semistructured interviews with 11 active police officers who worked rotating, second, or third shifts. Findings showed that shift work impacted sleep, health, relationships, and organizational support. Results showed that predictable schedules and available supports shaped officers' experiences, while frequent shift changes were associated with poorer sleep, irritability, reduced energy, and strain. This study concluded that shift demands, recovery, and support shaped shift work outcomes. Recommendations include improving schedule predictability and strengthening wellness and family-centered supports. The implications for positive social change include better support for police officers, retention, family stability, and safer police-community interactions.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, whose love and support have been the foundation of my journey. Words cannot fully capture the depth of my gratitude and affection for each of you. To Averie, Christopher, and Maddison, you are the reason behind so much of my strength and determination. Everything I do is rooted in the love I have for you and in the hope that my journey shows you that no dream is too big when you keep going. Averie, your compassion, your loving heart, and your intelligence make you so special. Christopher, watching you grow has made me so proud, and I hope you always learn to believe in yourself as much as I believe in you because you are smart, capable, and meant for great things. Maddison, your drive and the way you never give up inspire me every single day.

Each of you means more to me than I could ever fully express, and I will always be cheering you on, believing in you, and loving you through every step of life. You three will always be my best friends! I hope this achievement inspires you to continue pursuing greatness in all that you do. To my extended family and dear friends, your support has been invaluable, and I am honored to share these successes with you.

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I want to recognize the dedication of our officers who work the challenging demands of shift work. Your commitment to protect and serve around the clock impacts not only your personal schedules but also your physical and mental well-being. The sacrifices you make each day and night, often missing time with family, altering sleep patterns, and pushing through exhaustion, reflect your resilience and selflessness. Your work upholds the safety and security of our communities, and I am deeply grateful for your enduring strength and perseverance. Please know that your efforts do not go unnoticed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This study examines how shift work and related job demands shape police officers' subjective well-being, with particular attention to the lived experiences of officers working nontraditional shifts. Research by Somers and Terrill (2022) explored the various facets of police culture, investigating stressors experienced by officers, including their sex, gender, race, prior military experience, and education, which influence an officer's overall attitude. While these studies identified predictors tied to individual characteristics, a notable gap remained in the literature regarding the broader scope of officers' experiences.

Specifically, Toh and Cho (2023) found that research has overlooked the impact of unique work-related factors such as shift work, crime areas, and duty assignments. Somers and Terrill (2022) provided an important foundation by showing that officers' work experiences were associated with key cultural orientations. However, their study centered on culture and attitudes rather than officers' subjective well-being, leaving a clear need for research that connects these lived work conditions to well-being outcomes and related perceptions of the public and the profession.

Toh and Cho (2023) observed that policing is an inherently stressful and demanding profession that necessitates round-the-clock presence. Consequently, incorporating an intersectional approach into research is crucial to understanding the impact of shift work and shift changes on officers' well-being. Evidence has shown that dimension has been notably absent from current research. Sonnentag et al. (2017)

identified the challenging nature of shift work that may also contribute to difficulties in involving officers in research studies.

Therefore, the study aimed to provide a pragmatic understanding of how police officers manage their subjective well-being in the context of shift work, thereby addressing the existing gaps and contributing valuable insights into how officers meet job demands effectively. The chapter focuses on the impact of shift work and other work-related factors on the subjective well-being of police officers, particularly those working second and third shifts. It examines how shift schedules, crime areas, and duty assignments influence officers' mental health, job satisfaction, work-life balance, and overall perception of their profession.

Findings of the study have broad social implications, particularly for law enforcement agencies, policymakers, and community relations. These social implications include (a) improved officer well-being and retention, (b) enhanced public safety and community relations, (c) policy recommendations for shift work management, and (d) support for the families of police officers. Major sections of this chapter include a comprehensive review of existing research on police culture and occupational stressors, an in-depth exploration of shift work and its impact on officers' well-being, and a discussion of the theories that provide the foundation for analysis.

Additionally, the study presents a detailed examination of officers' lived experiences with shift work, highlighting key themes related to job demands, social support, and stress management. Finally, the research concludes with a summary of key

findings, offering insights into the broader implications for law enforcement policies, officer well-being, and future research directions.

Background

Nevels et al. (2021) noted that to ensure sufficient police presence for the prevention, deterrence, and detection of crime, law enforcement agencies are increasingly adopting various work-week schedules. Shift work, which deviates from the conventional daytime schedule of 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM, demands the rearrangement of officers' schedules, leading to disruptions in circadian rhythms. Chen and Wu (2022) reported that these disruptions are associated with a range of adverse effects, including impacts on immune, endocrine, metabolic, psychological, and social functioning. Although evidence has linked shift work to negative health outcomes, individual adaptability to shift work varies (Nevels et al., 2021). However, there is limited research examining how shift work affects police officers' relationships and overall well-being.

Recent research has suggested that the challenges of atypical working hours can be intensified by organizational constraints, such as understaffing, limited material resources, and other operational barriers (Anders et al. 2024). These constraints may add to officer stress during high-pressure responses, including crisis calls and situations involving aggression or threats (Anders et al., 2024; Nam et al., 2024; Todd et al., 2025). Night-shift work has been linked with poorer sleep quality and greater sleepiness among police employees, which can reduce recovery time and make it harder to access social supports that are more available during daytime hours (Ayorinde et al., 2025; James et al., 2023).

Additionally, newer research has also described how shift work can affect mental health through intertwined biological and social pathways, including circadian misalignment with altered HPA-axis functioning and cortisol rhythms, alongside downstream effects on immune regulation and broader strain on work-life balance and social interaction (Andreadi, Andreadi, et al., 2025 ; Grosser et al., 2022). Cheung and Chi-Mei Li (2022) reported that shift work, especially night shifts, can strain family dynamics due to the necessity for officers to sleep during daytime hours, thereby limiting family interaction.

Cheung and Chi-Mei Li (2022) also identified that when shift work and shift changes are not within the officer's control, it can lead to increased stress and negatively affect work-family balance. Potentially diminishing job performance, social capital, and overall work quality. These findings highlight the need for further research into the subjective well-being of police officers in relation to shift work and shift changes.

The present study was necessary because shift work in policing presented a significant, yet underexplored challenge related to officers' well-being, job performance, and family dynamics. While existing research has highlighted the physiological and psychological effects of shift work, there has been a limited understanding of how these impacts have translated into daily experiences, relationships, and overall quality of life for police officers.

Problem Statement

Police officers have routinely encountered operational and organizational demands that contribute to elevated stress. Recent research has described a broad range of

stressors and related mental health outcomes in policing (Santre et al., 2024). Shift work is one structural feature shared with other 24-hour occupations, and it is consistently linked with adverse sleep and health outcomes across sectors (Wu et al., 2022). Working nonstandard schedules can misalign circadian rhythms and shorten or fragment sleep, with downstream effects on physical and psychological health (Harris et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2022). Evidence has linked shift work with increased work-family and family-work conflict and lower quality of working life (Al & Rababah, 2023; Lisdayanti et al., 2023).

Recent evidence has continued to show that nonstandard schedules, including rotating shifts, were associated with higher work-family conflict compared to fixed-day schedules (Al-Hammouri & Rababah, 2023; Wang & Zhang, 2025). Broader research has linked shift and night work to work-life strain and family disruption (Silva & Costa, 2023). Within policing, qualitative findings have described how shift work intensified the challenges of balancing partner and parenting roles (Granholm Valmari et al., 2023).

Quantitative data have indicated that night shift officers report poorer sleep and greater safety risk, including drowsy driving after shifts (James et al., 2023; Jensen et al., 2022). Research on nonstandard and unpredictable schedules has suggested that women with caregiving responsibilities experience additional compounded strain (Luhr et al., 2022). Working mothers have reported greater work-life conflict and parenting stress, including difficulty coordinating childcare (Luhr et al., 2022; Wang, 2023; Zhao et al., 2021).

Subsequent qualitative research has suggested that shift schedules can disrupt family routines and relationship time, which contributes to work-family strain and

reduced well-being for officers and their families (Cheung & Chi-Mei Li, 2022). Despite the growing literature on police wellness, fewer studies have captured officers' first-person accounts of how second and third shift work shapes daily life, relationships, and subjective well-being (Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024).

Purpose of the Study

The objective of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of police officers who work various shifts, specifically focusing on second and third shifts. This research aimed to gain deeper insights into the unique experiences of those working second and third shifts within police departments. Findings from the study are intended to inform and develop best practice interventions tailored to the needs of this specific population.

Despite substantial research that has linked shift work in policing to sleep disruption and related mental and physical health concerns, comparatively fewer studies have focused specifically on officers' broader subjective well-being and the spill over into family life (Granhölm Valmari et al., 2023; James et al., 2023; Sousa et al., 2023a). To address the gap, the present study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which explores how individuals make meaning of significant lived experiences and produced a snapshot of their experiences (see Smith et al., 2021).

Recent policing research has also supported the value of examining outcomes across different shift schedules and, when possible, assessing changes over time. Accordingly, the study included participants exposed to different shifts to fully understand how shift work and shift changes have shaped their subjective well-being (see

James et al., 2023; Velasco-Garrido et al., 2022). Thorkildsen et al. (2023) explored how shift work was associated with circadian disruption and subsequent changes in stress regulation and immune function in both biological and social contexts when examining officers' well-being.

Qualitative research with police who have left the field, as well as recent syntheses focused on police turnover, has indicated that work-life strain and organizational conditions influence decisions about staying or leaving, emphasizing the value of qualitative methods for identifying barriers and informing retention efforts (Hoogesteyn et al., 2025; Lennie et al., 2025).

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of officers working second and third shifts regarding the impact of shift work on their subjective well-being?

Theoretical Foundation

The theories for this study were selected from key theories identified in the research offering distinct insights into the factors impacting police officers' well-being and performance. The chosen theories provided a structured approach to examining the complex dynamics of shift work in law enforcement. The theoretical foundation allows researchers to better understand and address the unique challenges associated with nontraditional work hours.

The major theoretical proposition within the study is rooted in social support theory, providing a comprehensive lens through which the well-being of police officers, particularly those working irregular and night shifts, can be analyzed. In applying social

support theory, social support buffers stress. Langton et al. (2024) theorized that social support from family, colleagues, and supervisors is essential in mitigating the adverse effects of shift work on officers' well-being. Langton et al. also stated that high-quality social support alleviates the stress associated with irregular work hours and reduces the isolation and work-family conflicts that often accompany these shifts.

Social support also reduces isolation. Uluturk (2024) explored the disruption of circadian rhythms and the limited opportunities for social interaction during night shifts, which diminished social support, therefore increasing feelings of isolation and stress among officers. Enhancing social support networks, particularly during challenging shifts, helps alleviate stressors and improve overall well-being. Uluturk discovered that support from colleagues and supervisors is crucial for managing the unique challenges of shift work. Langton et al. (2024) reported that the implementation of peer support programs, the cultivation of a supportive work environment, and the responsiveness of supervisors to shift-related challenges are critical in enhancing officers' capacity to cope with job demands.

The theoretical proposition emphasized the importance of understanding and addressing the quality of social support to improve the well-being of police officers working irregular shifts. Social support theory offered a structured approach for identifying effective interventions to reduce burnout, enhance job satisfaction, and support the overall health and performance of officers in demanding work environments.

Additionally, the study integrated the restorative rest and tactical stamina (RRTS) theory with a job demands-resources lens to interpret how disrupted sleep interacted with

occupational demands and available resources. RRTS positions restorative sleep as necessary for physiological repair and recovery and as a foundation for cognitive performance and emotion regulation in safety-critical work (James et al., 2023).

Prospective shift work research has indicated that sleep and mental health often worsened early in the shift transition, reinforcing the relevance of a sleep-centered framework when examining officers' subjective well-being (Harris et al., 2024).

Implications of shift work for police officers extend beyond fatigue and include inevitable effects on physical health, psychological well-being, social functioning, and job performance. Within RRTS, reduced restorative sleep is expected to undermine recovery processes and contribute to impaired attention, slower reaction time, and difficulties with emotion regulation in high-stakes contexts (James et al., 2023). In addition to these individual-level effects, shift schedules and sleep disruption spill into family and social domains, including work-family conflict and strained relationships (Cheung & Chi-Mei Li, 2022; Opoku et al., 2023; Violanti et al., 2012).

Recognizing these challenges, RRTS served as a foundation for developing evidence-based policies, training programs, and workplace resources to mitigate the negative effects of shift work and sleep deprivation (Logan et al., 2024). A deeper understanding of how shift work impacts officers' well-being can drive the creation of targeted support networks and wellness initiatives aimed at reducing stress, improving retention, and fostering a healthier, more sustainable work environment. Prioritizing sleep health and resilience-building initiatives not only improve officers' long-term health and performance but also strengthens public trust and the effectiveness of policing efforts.

Nature of the Study

The study design used IPA because it supported detailed exploration of lived experiences and meaning making through in-depth qualitative interviewing (see Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024). Alves et al. (2023) revealed that internal, external, task-related, and individual stressors significantly contributed to psychological distress, leading to negative self-perceptions, job dissatisfaction, and strained working relationships. The study advocates a systems approach to problem-solving, combining top-down and bottom-up strategies to manage these stressors effectively.

The research reported contributes to a deeper understanding of organizational stress in policing, providing valuable insights for improving the well-being and performance of police officers. IPA is well-suited to examine how officers make sense of shift work and its perceived effects on well-being because it prioritizes detailed, experience-near accounts and meaning-making from different perspectives (see Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024).

Definitions

Circadian rhythms: Refers to the body's approximately 24-hour timing system that helps regulate sleep-wake patterns and other physiological processes. Nonstandard work schedules can misalign this system, particularly when work occurs at night (Wu et al., 2022).

Crime areas: Geographic locations with varying levels of criminal activity that police officers must patrol and manage (Cheung & Chi-Mei Li, 2022).

Intersectional approach: Recognizes that experiences of shift work and well-being may differ based on overlapping identities and contextual factors (e.g., gender, caregiving roles, organizational context; Brady et al., 2024; Homan et al., 2021).

Job demands: The various requirements and pressures associated with police work, which can impact officers' physical and mental health (Demerouti, 2023; Murray, 2022).

Lived experience: Refers to participants' first-person accounts of how they make sense of everyday realities. IPA is designed to examine how people interpret and assign meaning to major experiences within their context (Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024).

Managing well-being: The strategies and practices police officers use to maintain their physical and mental health in the face of job-related stressors (Suter & Kowalski, 2021).

Officer attitude: Refers to the overall mindset or disposition of police officers, influenced by personal characteristics and experiences (Cheung & Chi-Mei Li, 2022).

Officer involvement in research: Refers to the participation of police officers in research studies, which can be challenging due to their demanding schedules (Cheung & Chi-Mei Li, 2022).

Perceptions of the public: How police officers view the public they serve, which can be affected by stressors and work conditions (Pooley & Turns, 2022).

Police culture: Refers to the shared values, beliefs, and behaviors within the law enforcement community that shape how officers perceive their roles and interact with the public and each other (Murray, 2022).

Restorative sleep: Refers to sleep that is sufficiently long and well-timed to support recovery and daytime functioning. Shift work can reduce restorative sleep by shortening total sleep time and increasing fragmentation (Harris et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2022).

Sex, gender, race: Demographic factors that can influence how police officers experience stress and their overall attitude toward their work (Andreescu & Vito, 2021).

Shift changes: Variations in work schedules that can disrupt routines and contribute to stress (James et al., 2023).

Shift work: Often defined as work scheduled outside of typical daytime hours, including evening, night, early-morning, rotating, and split shifts. In policing, shift work is common due to 24-hour service demands and has been linked to sleep disruption and mental health outcomes (James et al., 2023; Santre, 2024).

Sleep fragmentation: Describes repeated awakenings or disruptions that reduce sleep continuity. Fragmentation is more common in night and rotating schedules and is associated with worse subjective sleep quality (Wu et al., 2022).

Social support: Refers to perceived emotional, informational, and practical assistance from coworkers, supervisors, family, and friends. Reviews of police mental health and wellness frequently identify social support as a protective factor associated with better well-being (Santre, 2024).

Stressors: Demands that require sustained effort and can be operational (e.g., shift work, calls for service) or organizational (e.g., staffing, supervision, administrative demands). Recent reviews emphasize that organizational stressors can be particularly predictive of distress and burnout in policing (Alves et al., 2023; Di Nota et al., 2024).

Subjective well-being: An individual's perceived quality of life and happiness, which can be influenced by both personal and work-related factors (Pooley & Turns, 2022).

Views on the profession: Police officers' overall opinions and feelings about their job, including job satisfaction and career commitment (Cheung & Chi-Mei Li, 2022).

Work-family conflict: Occurs when work demands interfere with family roles, while family-work conflict reflects the reverse. Recent studies in policing link nonstandard schedules and lower schedule control with greater work-family strain (Cheung & Chi-Mei Li, 2022).

Work-life balance: Refers to the ability to balance professional responsibilities with personal life, which can be particularly challenging for officers working shifts (Suter & Kowalski, 2021).

Work-related factors: Refers to elements of the job that affect an officer's experience, including shift work, crime areas, and duty assignments (Murray, 2022).

Work-related hazards: Risks and dangers associated with police work, particularly those heightened by working night shifts (James et al., 2023).

Assumptions

The present study explored the perceptions of police officers working second and third shifts and how shift work and shift changes are associated with their subjective well-being. IPA assumes that participants provide experience-near accounts of how they make sense of key aspects of their lives. The approach also assumes that meaning is co-constructed through participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretative engagement with those accounts (Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024).

Further assumptions for this research included the expectation that participants would answer survey questions honestly and that they were law enforcement professionals. I assumed that participating officers had characteristics relevant to the phenomenon under investigation and were able to provide information grounded in their lived experiences. I also assumed that study participants had self-reported experience working second or third shift rotations. Additionally, I assumed that interviews would be conducted using the following primary interview question: "Describe your overall well-being while working second and third shifts?"

Scope and Delimitations

The current investigation focused on officers' subjective well-being in the context of second and third shift work, including how sleep, health routines, relationships, and work functioning were experienced and interpreted. Existing shift work research drew samples from specific regions or occupational contexts, limiting transferability across jurisdictions and policing environments. Context-sensitive qualitative work helped clarify

how shift work was experienced within specific organizational and community conditions.

Utilizing IPA limited the study to qualitative insights derived from participants' personal experiences (see Smith et al., 2021; Starr & Smith, 2025). IPA is not designed to produce or prioritize quantitative indicators such as standardized assessments or physiological measures (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2024; Thomas et al., 2024). These outlined boundaries maintained a clear methodological focus on its central research question and supported the applicability of findings to similar populations (see Im et al., 2023).

Policing requires 24-hour coverage; many officers work nonstandard schedules and cycle through different shift patterns over time. Utilizing IPA allowed me to examine second- and third-shift officers' lived experiences of shift work and shift changes, and their perceived relationship to subjective well-being. By maintaining a narrow focus, this analysis offers valuable insights that can assist organizational policymakers in developing and implementing reforms aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of shift work on officers' well-being.

Limitations

IPA is idiographic and uses small, purposive samples to allow detailed, case-by-case analysis. Sample size decisions were guided by the complexity of the topic, analytic depth, and practical constraints rather than statistical power (see Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024). Additionally, IPA utilizes a snapshot of participants' experiences at a specific point in time and does not account for longitudinal changes in well-being or stress levels (Rajasinghe et al., 2024). This time-based limitation hinders the ability to

understand the long-term effects of organizational stressors on participants. The study operated under the assumption that the original data collection was conducted ethically, among participants providing honest responses, and data was accurate and representative.

To address the study's limitations, future research should include officers from diverse settings, encompassing both urban and rural areas, to examine how socioeconomic and cultural contexts influence stress and well-being. Expanding the sample size to include officers of different ranks, backgrounds, and roles within the department would provide a broader and more representative range of experience. Additionally, incorporating the perspectives of leadership alongside road officers would offer a more holistic understanding of organizational stress and its impact.

Enhancing methodological approaches can further strengthen future studies. For example, conducting longitudinal research would allow for follow-up assessments over time, providing deeper insights into how stress levels and coping mechanisms evolve and how long-term exposure to stressors affects officers' well-being. By addressing these limitations, future research can yield more comprehensive, reliable, and applicable findings that inform evidence-based policy changes and enhance support systems for law enforcement personnel.

Significance

Thompson and Morton (2023) highlighted that the IPA methodological approach emphasizes the importance of understanding individual perspectives, essential for developing interventions tailored to the actual experiences and needs of officers. This study is significant in advancing the understanding of how organizational stressors

influence the well-being and performance of police officers, with practical implications for enhancing the working conditions and mental health of law enforcement professionals.

The significance of this study is that it helps fill gaps in the existing literature on the subjective well-being of police officers, particularly in relation to shift work and its broader implications on mental health, job performance, and family dynamics. Prior research has explored various individual characteristics of police officers, such as sex, gender, race, prior military experience, and education (Alves et al., 2023). This study addressed the underresearched area of work-related factors like shift work, crime area assignments, and duty schedules. These factors have been largely overlooked, yet they play a crucial role in shaping officers' overall attitudes, perceptions of their profession, and interactions with the public.

By focusing on the experiences of officers engaged in shift work, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how nonstandard working hours affect both officers' personal and professional lives. Alves et al. (2023) acknowledged the adverse effects of shift work on officers' physical and mental health, highlighting the disruption of circadian rhythms and the secondary impacts on immune, endocrine, metabolic, psychological, and social functioning. Moreover, it drew attention to the work-family conflicts that arose from rotating shifts, which not only strained family relationships but also diminished overall quality of life and job performance.

The study's significance is further underscored by its emphasis on the unique challenges faced by police officers in maintaining work-life balance amid the demands of

round-the-clock policing. By exploring how officers managed their subjective well-being in the context of shift work, the research provides valuable insights that can inform organizational policies aimed at mitigating the negative impacts of shift work schedules. As law enforcement agencies increasingly adopt a range of work-week schedules, it is important to maintain consistent coverage for crime prevention and detection.

Summary

The chosen methodology addressed the impact of shift work and related work factors on the subjective well-being of police officers, focusing on those working second and third shifts. Toh and Cho (2023) found that a noteworthy gap remained in understanding how specific work-related factors, such as shift work, crime areas, and duty assignments, affect officers' mental health and job satisfaction. Policing requires continuous 24-hour shift coverage and inherently involves substantial stress.

Despite recognition of shift work's adverse health effects, including disruptions to circadian rhythms and impacts on immune, endocrine, and psychological functioning. Nevels et al. (2021) and Wyse et al. (2017) found that limited research has examined how these disruptions affect officers' relationships and overall well-being. Shift work also strains work-family balance, particularly with night shifts, which can limit family interactions and exacerbate work-family conflicts.

Evidence has shown an oversight in existing research by examining officers' lived experiences of shift work and shift changes on second and third shifts and how they made meaning of these experiences in relation to subjective well-being. The study utilized IPA to explore and articulate the lived experiences of officers working nonstandard shifts. The

qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth examination (see Thompson & Morton, 2023) of how shift work affects officers' mental health, job satisfaction, and overall quality of life, and how these experiences may differ between second and third shifts.

By focusing on the unique experiences of officers in these shifts, the research provided valuable insights that could have guided the development of best-practice interventions tailored to the specific needs of shift-working police officers. Thompson and Morton (2023) noted that findings utilizing IPA have broader implications. The study can inform policies and strategies within policing as well as in other fields that rely on shift work. The study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection between work-related factors and officers' subjective well-being, addressing the gap in the literature and offering a foundation for future research.

Literature has highlighted key stressors associated with shift work, including disruptions to circadian rhythms, reduced access to social and familial support, and increased work-family conflict. These findings informed the design of the present study and supported the rationale for using IPA to examine how officers experienced and interpreted these stressors. Framed by social support theory and RRTS, this study provides a foundation for analyzing how social support mechanisms and sleep disturbances have influenced officers' ability to cope with shift work-related stress. To contextualize these findings, the next chapter presents a detailed literature review, examining existing research on police culture, occupational stressors, and the broader implications of shift work.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Police work is widely recognized as one of the most stressful professions. Di Nota et al. (2024) argued that it is primarily due to the significant physical and psycho-social stressors encountered by officers. The necessity of shift work is a fundamental aspect of modern policing, given that law enforcement operates continuously, with 24-hour shift coverage. Riedy et al. (2021) stated that officers are required to respond to service calls and emergencies to address community needs and uphold public order and safety.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.) approximately half of U.S. police agencies routinely schedule shifts exceeding eight hours to ensure persistent public protection. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of police officers working second and third shifts, with a focus on understanding how shift work influences their subjective well-being, job performance, and family dynamics.

Police work comes with both operational stressors and organizational pressures, and research shows these demands are associated with higher rates of mental health symptoms and burnout among officers (Alves et al., 2023; Santre et al., 2024). Existing research has documented associations between shift work and stress-related outcomes in policing. By foregrounding officers' lived experiences, this study contributed context-specific insight that informs organizational policies and individual-level support strategies intended to reduce strain and support performance and well-being.

The research examined the complexities of shift work in law enforcement, including its structure, variations, and impact on officers' well-being. It explored how

shift work affected officers' psychological health, leading to stress, burnout, and barriers to seeking mental health support. It highlighted the metabolic, cardiovascular, and dietary challenges officers face due to shift-related disruptions. It further examined how shift schedules contribute to sleep deprivation, cognitive impairment, and performance risks. Additionally, the review addressed the strain shift work placed on officers' relationships, social life, and ability to engage with their families. Lastly, it explained how the findings reinforced the need for policy interventions and support mechanisms.

Shift Work Defined

Moreno et al. (2019) noted that a shift work approach supports the continuous 24-hour coverage, making it especially relevant for sectors such as healthcare, transportation, hospitality, manufacturing, and law enforcement. By implementing shift work, organizations could optimize resource management, enhance efficiency, and provide essential services consistently. However, shift work was linked with pathways relevant to cardiometabolic risk, including circadian misalignment, metabolic disruption, and inflammatory processes (Wu et al., 2022). Police-focused research similarly reported associations between shift schedules, sleep disruption, and perceived health and quality-of-life outcomes (James et al., 2023).

In the context of policing, shift schedules have contributed to maintaining consistency and fairness among officers while allowing adequate time for mental and physical recovery between demanding shifts. Wu et al. (2022) reported shifts vary in length, including 8-hour, 10-hour, or 12-hour durations. There are 11 recognized types of shift schedules, though police agencies utilize seven main types: (a) fixed shift, (b)

rotating shift, (c) first shift, (d) second shift, (e) third shift, (f) on-call shift, and (g) overtime. Some of the primary shifts that are utilized daily in the field are (a) fixed shift, (b) rotating shift, (c) first shift, (d) second shift, and (e) third shift.

Fixed Shift

Police agencies commonly use fixed schedules (permanent day, evening, or night shifts) or rotating schedules that alternate shift timing across a defined cycle. Fixed schedules support stable sleep timing but can still create circadian strain for permanent night workers (Nevels et al., 2021). This arrangement mirrors the standard 40-hour workweek found in many professions. Officers on a fixed shift adhere to specific workdays and hours each week, thus maintaining a consistent routine, except for deviations due to holidays, overtime, or mandatory training. In law enforcement agencies, this often translates to a schedule from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM.

First Shift

Across agencies, shift lengths often cluster around 8, 10, or 12-hour tours of duty, with start times set to match operational demand and staffing constraints (James et al., 2023). For an 8-hour shift rotation, the most prevalent shift block among agencies is from 7:00 AM to 3:00 PM. In a 10-hour shift rotation, the most common shift block is from 6:00 AM to 4:00 PM. For a 12-hour shift rotation, the typical shift blocks are from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM or from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM.

Second Shift

Evening and overnight tours are scheduled to maintain 24-hour coverage, and departments can stagger start times to manage overlap, court schedules, and fatigue risk

(James et al., 2023). For an 8-hour shift rotation, the most common shift block is from 3:00 PM to 11:00 PM. In a 10-hour shift rotation, the prevalent shift block is from 2:00 PM to 12:00 AM. For a 12-hour shift rotation, the typical shift block is from 3:00 PM to 3:00 AM.

Third Shift

When establishing appropriate start and end times for swing shift officers, it is important to consider the three primary shift options: 8-hour, 10-hour, and 12-hour shifts. For an 8-hour shift rotation, the most common shift block is from 11:00 PM to 7:00 AM. In a 10-hour shift rotation, the prevalent shift block is from 10:00 PM to 8:00 AM. For a 12-hour shift rotation, typical shift blocks are from 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM or from 7:00 PM to 7:00 AM.

Officers may differ in their preferences for shift schedules based on chronotype, family responsibilities, and organizational context. Recent police-focused work suggested that schedule design and opportunities for recovery can influence perceived health, safety, and quality of life (Ayorinde et al., 2025; James et al., 2023).

Rotating Shift

Rotating schedules vary in rotation and time. While rotations distribute fewer desirable shifts, frequent switches can increase circadian disruption when sleep timing must repeatedly shift (James et al., 2023; Nevels et al., 2021). Among rotating shift patterns, 12-hour shifts are the most prevalent in police departments, followed by 10-hour shifts and, less commonly, 8-hour shifts. There are many different shift styles, but the

primary shift rotations include (1) 2-2-3 shift schedule, (2) 4-3 shift schedule, and (3) 4-10 shift schedule.

2-2-3 Shift Schedule

The 2-2-3 schedule involves officers working 12-hour shifts across a 28-day rotation cycle. Officers who work "day" shift work from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM or 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM. In the subsequent 28-day cycle, officers switch to "night" shift, working from 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM or 7:00 PM to 7:00 AM. Compressed workweeks using longer tours (e.g., 12-hour shifts) often provided longer recovery blocks between work periods, which could be perceived as beneficial for work-life balance depending on workload and overtime expectations (Velasco-Garrido et al., 2022).

4-3 Shift Schedule

Some agencies adopt patterns that alternate blocks of workdays and days off (e.g., 4 days on followed by 3 days off) to balance coverage with recovery time (James et al., 2023). This schedule is favored for its ability to provide consistency between day and night shifts and for limiting the maximum number of consecutive workdays to 4.

4-10 Shift Schedule

The 4-10 shift schedule is a pattern utilized among police departments for its potential to enhance work-life balance while maintaining operational coverage. Ten-hour shifts are used to concentrate work into fewer days (e.g., four 10-hour shifts), creating longer consecutive time off. Reported impacts vary by context, including call volume, staffing levels, and overtime (James et al., 2023).

Positive Impacts of Shift Work

Shift work has presented numerous challenges, but it also offers several positive impacts, both at the individual and organizational levels. One of the most significant benefits of shift work in policing is the ability to provide 24-hour police coverage. Many law enforcement agencies have offered higher wages, overtime pay, and shift differentials for officers working evening and overnight shifts. These financial incentives significantly increase an officer's overall earnings (Kelly, 2024). Working nontraditional shifts exposes officers to unique learning experiences and specialized assignments. Many high-crime incidents, including serious investigations, occur during night shifts, providing officers with greater exposure to complex cases and critical incident responses (Riedy et al., 2021).

Additionally, night shifts and off-peak hours often involve fewer administrative tasks, meetings, and supervisory oversight, allowing officers more autonomy in their duties. It also leads to fewer interactions with large crowds, media presence, or community scrutiny that officers often encounter during daytime shifts (DI Milia & Bjorvatn, 2024). Furthermore, some officers may prefer working at night due to personal lifestyle choices or natural productivity patterns. DI Milia and Bjorvatn (2024) stated that night shifts could better align with the routines of the officer or the officer's family, leading to increased job satisfaction and better performance.

Key Variables and Concepts

The literature review revealed consistent themes regarding the impacts of night and rotating work across occupations, including disrupted sleep, fatigue, and decreased

health effects. Umbrella and longitudinal evidence indicated that shift work is associated with circadian disruption and changes in immune, endocrine, and metabolic functioning (Harris et al., 2024; Violanti et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2022). In policing, recent studies reported similar patterns linking shift schedules with sleep disruption and perceived health and safety outcomes (Di Nota et al., 2024; James et al., 2023).

Adaptation to shift work varies, and not all individuals have experienced the same degree of disruption. Recent evidence has highlighted individual differences and contextual factors that can shape how people respond to nonstandard schedules (Harris et al., 2024; Nevels et al., 2021). In policing, adaptive scheduling and recovery-supportive practices emerged as modifiable targets for wellness initiatives (Ayorinde et al., 2025; James et al., 2023).

Nevels et al. (2021) found that some individuals adapted more effectively than others. A systematic review of new shift workers found meaningful variability in “shift work tolerance,” with preshift sleep, mental health, and work characteristics predicting who experienced worse sleep and mental health after transitioning into shift schedules (Harris et al., 2024). Large-scale data on night-shift workers further showed that risk and protective factors for shift work sleep disorders vary across individuals, reinforcing that adaptation is not uniform (Degenfellner et al., 2025). The Buffalo Cardio-Metabolic Occupational Police Stress (Violanti et al., 2006) study offered valuable evidence in understanding other effects of shift work. A cross-sectional study conducted by Violanti et al. (2006) investigated the relationship between occupational stressors and psychological or physiological health indicators.

Additional research supported these findings, associating police shift work, particularly night and rotating schedules, with poor sleep and health outcomes that matter for long-term wellness in law enforcement populations (James et al., 2023; Kervezee et al., 2022; Palmieri et al., 2025; Rohwer et al., 2022). The literature review provided a detailed examination of the psychological and physical effects of shift work on police officers, highlighting both the strength of current research and identified gaps that justify the need for further investigation.

Psychological Aspects

Police officers have experienced elevated stress and emotional demands, which can contribute to symptoms of anxiety, depression, and burnout. Recent research on police mental health emphasized both operational and organizational contributors to these outcomes (Alves et al., 2023; Santre et al., 2024). Research conducted by Jetelina et al. (2020) found that only 4% of 446 surveyed officers had sought mental health services within a one-year timeframe. Jetelina et al. explained that the study identified several barriers to seeking treatment, including difficulty in recognizing mental health challenges, concerns about confidentiality, skepticism about therapists' understanding of their profession, and the perception that seeking therapy may indicate unfitness for duty.

James et al. (2023) observed that barriers to seeking treatment heightened officers' susceptibility to burnout, often resulting in mood swings, memory impairment, attention lapses, and delayed reaction times. Disrupted sleep patterns interfere with essential functions of officers, leading to impaired physical recovery, cognitive processing, emotional regulation, and toxin clearance (Logan et al., 2024). Over time, inconsistent or

inadequate sleep diminished cognitive function, weakened emotional resilience, and reduced physical performance, ultimately compromising the overall well-being and operational effectiveness.

Di Nota et al. (2024) and Green et al. (2022) noted that shift work, which frequently disrupts sleep cycles, further compounds these issues by increasing stress perception and the risk of developing anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Additionally, a study by Toh and Cho (2023) found that on-the-job breaks aided in recovery by allowing officers to rest physically, partially disengage mentally, and connect with others, thereby mitigating some of the adverse effects of their demanding roles.

Sleep restriction and circadian misalignment are linked with worsening mental health outcomes, including elevated distress and burnout risk, among workers transitioning into shift work (Harris et al., 2024). In police-specific work, burnout has been associated with dysregulated diurnal cortisol parameters, suggesting that chronic occupational strain may coincide with HPA-axis disruption (McCanlies et al., 2020). These empirical patterns provided context for participants' descriptions of heightened stress and emotional wear following night shifts or rapid shift changes.

Physical Health and Nutrition

Disrupted sleep affects physical recovery and next-day functioning. Across shift-working populations, insufficient sleep is associated with fatigue and reduced performance (Wu et al., 2022). In policing, research connected shift work with sleep disruption and perceived impacts on health and safety (James et al., 2023). One of the most immediate consequences of inadequate sleep is chronic fatigue (James et al., 2023).

Without sufficient restorative sleep, officers experienced persistent low energy levels, which impaired their physical endurance and made it difficult to meet the demands of their job.

Van de Putte et al. (2022) explained that cognitive function influences emotional regulation and sleep deprivation, leading to heightened emotional reactivity and a reduced ability to manage stress effectively. In high-stress environments like law enforcement, Van de Putte et al. identified that poor sleep results in officers becoming irritable, less patient, and more prone to frustration. This heightened emotional reactivity impacted their interactions with both colleagues, family, and the public, potentially escalating situations that might otherwise have been resolved calmly. It also contributes to strained workplace and family relationships, which increases the likelihood of conflict.

In law enforcement, physical strength and endurance are often required for extended shifts, pursuing suspects, or responding to emergencies. Logan (2024) discovered that diminished energy reserves compromised an officer's ability to perform effectively and safely. Green (2022) and Yoo and Franke (2013) observed that maintaining physical fitness was essential for optimizing concentration, performance, and safety, necessitating a focus on both nutrition strategies for health and those that enhance performance.

Moreover, Logan (2024) found that disrupted sleep weakens the immune system, making the body more susceptible to illnesses and infections. Night-shift officers are likely to face a higher risk of illnesses, from minor colds to more severe conditions, as their immune system is repeatedly compromised by poor sleep quality. This increased

vulnerability not only affects overall health but also leads to more sick days, reduced time on duty, and potentially compromised team performance.

Working night schedules can show measurable adverse changes, including elevations in blood pressure and altered heart-rate variability compared with day-shift periods (Tseng et al., 2024). A study conducted by Mackenzie-Shalders et al. (2020) linked body composition and physical fitness with socio-cultural and occupational factors. Mackenzie-Shalders et al. found that while many police personnel were willing to adopt healthier eating habits, they faced challenges in achieving these goals due to the unpredictable nature of their work, such as irregular hours and unexpected events, which disrupted their dietary plans.

Moreover, shift work has been associated with physiological changes that contribute to longer-term health risk, including metabolic dysregulation and inflammatory pathways (Wu et al., 2022). Emerging research has linked circadian misalignment with changes in the gut microbiome, which further influenced metabolic and immune function (Touitou, 2025). Research by Kervezee et al. (2023) revealed that night shifts disrupted 24-hour rhythms in the urinary metabolome among rotating shift workers, indicating a misalignment that contributed to various health challenges.

Velazquez-Kronen et al. (2022) observed that the lack of proper muscle repair and energy replenishment leads to increased physical injury. When officers are required to perform physically strenuous tasks without adequate rest, their reaction times slow, balance and coordination suffer, and they are more prone to accidents or injuries, particularly during high-stress or rapid-response scenarios. Velazquez-Kronen et al.

explored that over time, this leads to cumulative injuries or chronic conditions, such as back pain, joint problems, and cardiovascular strain, further impacting their ability to perform their duties and diminishing their long-term physical health.

Sleep and Fatigue

Green et al. (2022) and Kervezee et al. (2021) observed that police officers are at a heightened risk for sleep disorders compared to the general population. The irregular shifts and overtime inherent to policing contributed significantly to sleep disturbances. Nevels et al. (2021) explained that it adversely affected cognitive and emotional functioning, which are critical in the demanding field of law enforcement. Green et al. (2022) and Violanti et al. (2017) concluded that poor sleep quality impairs sustained attention, vigilant awareness, learning, content memorization, and emotion regulation and may exacerbate existing conditions.

James et al. (2023) found that the constant disruption of natural sleep cycles, especially for night-shift officers, interferes with circadian rhythms, which are essential for regulating emotional balance and psychological resilience. James et al. noted that when sleep cycles are repeatedly interrupted, officers struggle with emotional dysregulation, resulting in greater vulnerability to anxiety and difficulty coping with stressful situations. Moreover, chronic sleep deprivation has impaired the brain's ability to process emotions and adaptively respond to traumatic events, potentially increasing the risk of post-traumatic stress symptoms over time.

Nonstandard schedules affect not only sleep, but also time with partners, children, and social networks. Qualitative studies described how officers and families would adjust

routines and still experience strain when schedules reduced shared time or created mismatched household rhythms (Cheung & Chi-Mei Li, 2022). These findings emphasized that shift work is a common feature of high-demand occupations and is consistently associated with poorer sleep and health outcomes (Harris et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2022). Police officers have experienced elevated stress and emotional demands, which contribute to symptoms of anxiety, depression, and burnout. Recent research of police mental health emphasizes both operational and organizational contributors to these outcomes (Alves et al., 2023; Santre et al., 2024).

Additional recent research has continued to show that fatigue, sleepiness, and reduced sleep that surrounded shift work were associated with poorer safety and performance outcomes in policing, including higher rates of excessive sleepiness on night shifts and increased risk of drowsy driving after work (James et al., 2023; Jensen et al., 2022). Consistent with public safety concerns, sleep loss has been linked to impaired judgment and decision-making. Also, experimental evidence has indicated that sleep deprivation increased biased threat decision processes in shoot or don't shoot tasks (Johnson et al., 2021).

Sleep loss has been associated with slower reaction times, reduced attention, and changes in the decision-making process, which matter in safety-critical work (Harris et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2022). In police populations, shift work has been linked with poorer sleep and perceived health and safety outcomes, highlighting sleep as a plausible pathway from scheduling to subjective well-being (James et al., 2023).

Shift work also disrupted sleep timing and circadian alignment, with night work associated with more disordered sleep patterns and shorter, less restorative sleep (Boersma et al., 2023; Erickson et al., 2023; Jensen et al., 2022). Furthermore, reviews of shift work recovery emphasized that the impacts of sleep and circadian disruption extended beyond work performance into recovery, social functioning, and work-life and family well-being (Kalkanis et al., 2023).

Family Impact

Limited recovery time, high demands, and sleep disruption created a cycle in which fatigue and stress compounded each other. Research has suggested that schedule design and recovery-supportive practices are relevant targets for police wellness efforts (Ayorinde et al., 2025; James et al., 2023). Although extensive research exists on the experiences of shift workers, there was a limited body of work addressing their personal lives and the impacts on families.

Work-family strain is described as the difficulty of balancing the demands of work and home roles. In policing, nonstandard schedules reduced shared family time and created mismatched routines, which heightened work-family conflict (Cheung & Chi-Mei Li, 2022). The increased effect of circadian disruption, sleep loss, and high job demands contributed to long-term health risks. Umbrella and systematic reviews of shift work consistently identified associations with multiple adverse outcomes, reinforcing the importance of sleep and recovery in shift-working populations (Harris et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2022).

Empathy in policing is critical, as officers often engage with people experiencing crises or distress. However, Zhao et al. (2024) reported that sleep deprivation has reduced an individual's capacity for empathy, making it harder to connect emotionally with others or to exercise compassion in difficult situations. Zhao et al. wrote that over time, diminished empathy contributed to what is known as compassion fatigue, a form of burnout that arises from constantly helping others without sufficient emotional recovery. Poor sleep exacerbated compassion fatigue, reduced the ability to engage empathetically, and impacted the quality of service they provided to the community.

Sleep deprivation affected officers in the workplace but also impacted their relationships with family and friends. Opoku et al. (2023) discovered that disrupted sleep patterns lead to increased isolation, as night-shift officers often operated on schedules that misaligned with those of their loved ones. Additionally, Opoku et al. stated that the emotional toll of sleep deprivation, such as irritability and mood swings, strained family dynamics, creating friction at home and lead to feelings of disconnection. Relationships with spouses, children, and close friends, are often impacted by the indirect consequences of the officer's disrupted emotional state (Opoku et al., 2023).

Scheduled evening or night shifts interfered with family and social relationships, making it harder to participate in leisure and community activities. This contributed to the feelings of social isolation and reduced support from friends and family (Rohwer et al., 2022). Police officers also developed tendencies to be excessively protective and controlling toward their spouses and children. This was due to occupational stress and the carryover of hypervigilant, protective, and authoritarian work-role behaviors into the

home, creating additional tension and restricting family members' freedoms (Cox et al., 2022).

Burnout and Quality of Life

Operational stressors (e.g., calls for service) and organizational stressors (e.g., staffing, supervision, and administrative burden) affect overall well-being. Recent research highlighted that organizational stressors elicited strong physiological responses and are significant predictors of burnout and mental health outcomes in policing (Alves et al., 2023; Di Nota et al., 2024; Santre et al., 2024). Burnout is commonly characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Recent research has highlighted how chronic stressors that often co-occur with sleep disruption can exacerbate this pattern (Alves et al., 2023).

At the performance level, total sleep deprivation has been associated with increased risk-taking and altered ventromedial prefrontal cortex connectivity (Wang et al., 2022). Systematic evidence indicated that sleep-deprived driving produced physiological changes and driving-performance deficits that raised safety risks for night-shift workers commuting after work (Tomson et al., 2025). Beyond cognition and safety, research suggested that disrupted sleep reduced empathic responding and prosocial decision-making, which carries implications for police-public interactions (Gordon-Hecker et al., 2025).

Shi et al. (2023) found that emotional dysregulation that resulted from sleep deprivation affected an officer's overall job satisfaction. When emotional strain built, officers felt less satisfied with their work, especially if they found themselves

experiencing frequent conflicts or feeling disconnected from colleagues. Shi et al. found that lower job satisfaction led to decreased morale, lack of motivation, and a sense of resentment toward the demands of night-shift work. In some cases, this frustration contributed to higher turnover rates as officers sought positions that allowed for better work-life balance and sleep quality.

Systematic research has identified both risk and protective factors for police burnout with organizational stressors and limited resources frequently emphasized (Alves et al., 2023; Santre et al., 2024). Viegas et al. (2024) noted that sleep deprivation led to a reduced ability to focus, frequent lapses in attention, and mental fatigue. This is particularly problematic for night-shift officers, who have experienced decreased alertness during overnight hours. In law enforcement, lapses in attention are dangerous, as officers may miss critical threats in their environment, increasing their vulnerability and potentially compromising public safety.

Logan et al. (2024) reported that burnout was often an emerging result of prolonged exposure to stress without sufficient recovery periods. Logan et al. noted that for night-shift officers, the lack of restorative sleep exacerbated feelings of exhaustion and detachment, contributing to the decline in job satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment. As burnout intensified, officers experienced reduced motivation, empathy, and patience, which has major effects on both their personal lives and professional performance.

Research has continued to show that burnout in policing was associated with degraded functioning at work, with implications for how well officers delivered services and interacted with the public (Alves et al., 2023; Bezie et al., 2024). In police samples,

burnout was commonly framed as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Bezie et al. 2024). Continued research has identified operational conditions such as long working hours, demanding schedules, and night work as salient contributors (Bezie et al., 2024; Correia et al., 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2024).

Consistent with these patterns, research that compared shift schedules in police officers found that night shifts were associated with poorer sleep quality and greater sleepiness, including elevated risk indicators such as drowsy driving after work, which undermines day-to-day performance and safety (James et al., 2023). Related field research with police investigators linked sleep problems to more serious administrative errors, greater difficulty regulating anger toward suspects, and reinforcing the performance consequences of sleep disruption that can accompany shift work (Krizan et al., 2023).

Furthermore, Viegas et al. (2024) observed that sleep-deprived officers struggled with impulse control and risk assessment, two critical components of decision-making. When sleep-deprived, the brain's prefrontal cortex, which regulates complex planning, impulse control, and decision-making, becomes less efficient. Viegas et al. noted that this leads to more impulsive or risky choices, as officers rely on gut reactions rather than carefully considered responses. In law enforcement, where split-second decisions must often be made under pressure, compromised impulse control and impaired judgment have serious consequences, potentially escalating tense situations rather than de-escalating them.

Literature Search Strategy

Police officers globally encounter the complex task of maintaining their health and well-being while ensuring public safety and security around the clock. To support doctoral research in this field, Walden University provided an advanced search system designed to assist students in studying, organizing, and monitoring literature related to their research topics. This system featured several tabs, including an outline of key terms and their relevance, a summary of article statistics, a reference log, a keyword log, and a systematic search plan. These tools facilitated the organization of research information and enhanced the analysis and presentation of findings.

I utilized various online databases and search engines, including PsycINFO, EBSCO, SAGE Publications, PubMed, the American Psychological Association, ProQuest, and Academic Search Complete. Google Scholar was also employed to thoroughly explore the literature on the topic. Key search terms and phrases used in the investigation included variations of *law enforcement, police, overnight shifts, effects of poor sleep, nutritional impacts of shift work, familial effects of shift work, officer resilience to shift work, health risks associated with shift work, shift work and mental health, law enforcement retention, police recruiting, sleep hygiene, risks of shift work, police turnover, police performance, law enforcement performance, police fatigue, law enforcement fatigue, police stress, the BCOPS study, and police burnout. Additionally, sub-category search terms included psychology, mental health, health, resilience, burnout, self-efficacy, turnover, stress, sleep, police, well-being, and wellness.*

To refine the literature and identify relevant scholarly articles on the specific research problem, searches were configured to retrieve articles published within the past 5 years. However, foundational and theoretical literature was not subject to this time constraint to establish a comprehensive background. All articles were limited to full-text and peer-reviewed sources.

After the initial review, titles of relevant articles were recorded along with the number of articles selected for further examination. If the initial keyword search yielded twenty or fewer articles, no additional keyword searches were performed, and all primary article titles were reviewed. Relevant articles were then included in the literature review references and saved for further analysis. This method was consistently applied across all the mentioned databases, ensuring reliability and reproducibility in the search process.

Initially, searches were conducted without restrictions on publication dates to encompass the entire body of historical literature. A systematic literature search was then conducted for peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2026, ensuring a focus on the most recent research. Search terms included police or law enforcement combined with shift work, shift schedule, circadian rhythm, sleep, fatigue, work-family conflict, well-being, and social support. Additional studies examined the effects of shift work on firefighters, emergency management services personnel, nurses, factory workers, construction workers, and military personnel.

The trends observed in the research included a notable focus on these occupational groups, variations in the volume of published research, and differences in citation frequency and author prominence. Violanti, a recognized expert in the field and

leader of BCOPS research (Violanti et al. 2006), has contributed extensively to this area with numerous studies that inform both current and historical research on the effects of shift work. The methods used were essential in selecting studies directly relevant to the research problem. Each study was carefully chosen to align with the research question, prioritizing the most recent publications to incorporate the most recent data. Historical studies were noted and included in the research to provide context and background.

A total of 416,364 raw articles were retrieved from the aforementioned databases, representing a comprehensive initial search. The literature review on police shift work and officer well-being has been a continuous process, with articles being systematically filtered to identify those most pertinent to the research objectives.

Theoretical Foundation

Grant and Osanloo (2016) stated that the selection of a theoretical foundation is essential for providing insight into the phenomenon under investigation and shapes the researcher's approach to understanding various variables in the study. In qualitative research, the theoretical foundation is particularly important as it influences how researchers interpret and analyze the data. The major theoretical approach within this study is rooted in social support theory.

This theory provided a comprehensive lens through which the well-being of police officers, particularly those working irregular and night shifts, was analyzed. In applying social support theory, social support buffers stress. Langton et al. (2024) theorized that social support from family, colleagues, and supervisors is essential in mitigating the adverse effects of shift work on officers' well-being. Langton et al. also

stated that high-quality social support can alleviate the stress associated with irregular work hours and reduce the isolation and work-family conflicts that often accompany these shifts.

Social support reduces isolation. Uluturk (2024) stated that the disruption of circadian rhythms and the limited opportunities for social interaction during night shifts diminish social support, thereby increasing feelings of isolation and stress among officers. Enhancing social support networks, particularly during challenging shifts, helps to alleviate these stressors and improve overall well-being.

Workplace support is important for the well-being of officers. Uluturk (2024) discovered that support from colleagues and supervisors was crucial for managing the unique challenges of shift work. Langton et al. (2024) reported that the implementation of peer support programs, the fostering of a supportive work environment, and the responsiveness of supervisors to shift-related challenges are vital in enhancing officers' capacity to cope with job demands.

Furthermore, the strain on family dynamics, due to limited interaction with family members, reduces the emotional and practical support officers typically receive at home. Qualitative research with police officers described how nonstandard schedules and unpredictable demands spill over into family routines and police specific research, greater work-family conflict was associated with higher stress and stronger turnover intentions, while supportive supervision and family support resources helped buffer those effects (Li et al., 2022).

Enhancing family support through counseling services, family-inclusive wellness initiatives, and more predictable or flexible scheduling was discovered to alleviate some of these stressors (Ayorinde et al., 2025; Richmond et al., 2025). Additional research highlighted social support as a key protective factor and pointed to multi-level interventions such as peer support networks, supervisor and leadership training, and organizational policies that strengthen work-family balance (Bachmann et al., 2026; Bowers et al., 2025; Ryu et al., 2025; Sánchez et al., 2025; Santre, 2024).

Broader emergency responder family research also suggested that structured support for spouses and partners, including psychoeducation and support groups, improved perceived support and coping in families exposed to occupational stress (Sharp et al., 2022). This theoretical approach emphasized the importance of understanding and addressing the quality of social support to improve the well-being of police officers working irregular shifts. Social support theory offered a structured foundation for identifying effective interventions to reduce burnout, enhance job satisfaction, and support the overall health and performance of officers in demanding work environments.

Additionally, for this study, I also integrated the RRTS theory with a job demands-resources lens to interpret how disrupted sleep interacted with occupational demands and available resources. RRTS positioned restorative sleep as necessary for physiological repair and recovery and as a foundation for cognitive performance and emotion regulation in safety-critical work (James et al., 2023). Prospective shift work research indicated that sleep and mental health often worsen early in a shift transition, reinforcing

the relevance of a sleep-centered framework when examining officers' subjective well-being (Harris et al., 2024).

Recent evidence has continued to link inadequate restorative sleep with heightened stress, anxiety, and burnout, in part through dysregulation of cortisol secretion when sleep is restricted or mistimed (Alves et al., 2023; Andreadi, Filippidis, & Ellis, 2025). Circadian misalignment from night and rotating schedules shifts internal circadian timing and contributes to subsequent physiological strain, including inflammatory and cardiometabolic risk indicators documented across night-shift workers (Kosmadopoulos et al., 2024; Erdem et al., 2025).

The RRTS theory offered a direct explanation for why the timing, duration, and continuity of sleep matter for recovery and operational readiness, which is central when examining night work and rotating schedules. The job demands resources lens was added since policing involves high demands that can compound the biological strain of circadian disruption. Resources like schedule control, supportive supervision, peer support, and access to wellness services have been proven to buffer the effects and support coping and recovery. Used together, RRTS helps frame the physiological and restorative mechanisms affected by shift work, and job demands-resources explains how workplace demands and available supports shape whether disrupted sleep translates into greater stress and burnout or is mitigated through protective resources.

By applying RRTS theory through a job demands-resources lens, the study provided a more complete understanding of how disrupted sleep affected officers' well-being and performance, and how supports and resources helped reduce stress. This

approach also offered insight into how improving sleep quality or adjusting shift schedules could strengthen officers' mental, physical, and emotional health.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

This study examined existing research and theories to understand key concepts: subjective well-being, shift work, mental health, and police officer experiences. The literature review identified gaps, established the study's relevance, and highlighted the importance of exploring the lived experiences of police officers working nontraditional hours. Núñez-Elvira (2023) stated that subjective well-being encompasses an individual's self-assessment of life satisfaction, happiness, and mental health.

Shift work, particularly second and third shift, disrupts circadian rhythms, impacting physical and mental health. Kervezee et al. (2023) found that studies across various professions, especially in high-stress roles like law enforcement, have documented negative effects such as sleep disorders, increased stress, and mental health challenges. Kervezee et al. noted that while research on the general effects of shift work exists, studies specific to law enforcement, particularly on long-term well-being and relationships, are limited. Given the unique challenges officers face on night shifts, comparing the findings with current shift work research is valuable.

Mental health is a major concern for police officers, who frequently encounter high-stress and traumatic events. Arjmand et al. (2024) argued that night shifts can exacerbate mental health issues, contributing to sleep disruption, stress, and isolation. Previous studies have discovered higher rates of anxiety, depression, and PTSD among officers; however, limited research has examined how shift work directly impacts mental

health in policing. This study addressed this gap, focusing on how shift work influences officers' mental well-being and coping mechanisms.

Shift work puts a strain on personal relationships and family life, particularly for officers working second or third shifts. Arjmand et al. (2024) noted that irregular schedules often lead to relationship stress, isolation, and reduced social interaction, impacting officers' ability to achieve work-life balance. This study explored how shift schedules affected officers' relationships, examining the challenges of maintaining healthy connections while balancing demanding work hours.

Gutschmidt and Vera (2022) stated that coping strategies were vital for managing stress and building psychological resilience. Gutschmidt and Vera observed that prior research had identified various coping mechanisms used by police officers, including social support, physical exercise, and mental health resources. The study extends existing knowledge by investigating whether and how these strategies were used by officers on night shifts and identifying additional resources that could support their resilience. In synthesizing this literature, the study provided a foundation for exploring how shift work impacted officers' well-being, relationships, and coping abilities, aimed to inform strategies that enhance support for officers facing these unique challenges.

Solutions

Various factors influenced how individuals adapted to shift work, including health, fitness, age, lifestyle, and domestic responsibilities. Tseng et al. (2024) reported that while inherent characteristics could not be changed, lifestyle adjustments and behavioral modifications helped to make working shift work more manageable, thereby

improving officer retention and performance. Research has indicated that identifying an optimal sleep schedule is important for maintaining a healthy work-life balance during shift work. This process often involved a trial-and-error approach to finding the most effective schedule tailored to the officer's needs and environment.

A consistent sleep duration of 7-8 hours is ideal for optimal functioning. However, according to Harris et al. (2024), many police officers struggle to achieve this amount of quality sleep due to the nature of their work. Preshift naps and strategically timed sleep periods upon returning home can help adjust sleep schedules. Longitudinal evidence indicated that transitions into shift work were associated with changes in sleep and health over time (Harris et al., 2024), and police-focused research similarly linked shift schedules with sleep-related and quality-of-life outcomes (James et al., 2023).

Garde et al. (2020) discovered that daytime sleep was typically more challenging for night shift workers due to its shorter duration, lighter quality, and increased likelihood of disturbances from noise and higher temperatures. To improve sleep quality, it was recommended that officers create an environment conducive to rest by minimizing noise, maintaining a comfortable temperature, using blackout curtains, and incorporating white noise or background music to block external disturbances.

Diet also plays a significant role in managing shift work. Research has suggested that consuming regular, light meals or snacks is less likely to impact alertness compared to infrequent heavy meals. Tseng et al. (2024) stated that while sugary foods and caffeine provide temporary boosts, they are followed by energy dips, affecting overall alertness.

Maintaining hydration is also essential, as dehydration can impair both mental and physical performance.

Navruz-Varlı and Mortaş (2024) discovered that an unhealthy lifestyle, coupled with shift work, may exacerbate existing sleep problems or increase the risk of sleep disorders. Navruz-Varlı and Mortaş noted that to counter these effects, maintaining a balanced diet, regular exercise, and minimizing the use of nicotine, alcohol, and other stimulants were essential for enhancing overall well-being. Shift work leads to an increase in social isolation, as officers may find it challenging to align their schedules with friends and family. Effective communication with loved ones about shift work challenges can foster support and facilitate social engagement during available hours.

Therefore, eliminating or decreasing rotating shifts and moving to permanent shifts can mitigate the negative impact on mental and physical health. If rotating shifts are unavoidable, extending the cycles between rotations can help officers maintain more stable sleep patterns and improve overall health and well-being. These solution-focused strategies highlight practical, evidence-informed approaches to reduce the strain of shift work.

Summary

Shift work has presented significant challenges in obtaining sufficient high-quality sleep. Across occupations, night and rotating schedules are associated with shorter and more fragmented sleep, circadian misalignment, and increased risk for multiple health outcomes (Harris et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2022). Emerging research also suggested that circadian disruption can affect broader physiological systems, including metabolic

pathways and gut microbiome (Touitou, 2025). The combination of high job demands and insufficient sleep is associated with reduced alertness and increased safety risk.

Recent evidence linked shift schedules with sleep disruption and perceived impacts on health, safety, and quality of life (James et al., 2023), consistent with broader shift work findings across industries (Wu et al., 2022). While shift work is necessary to ensure continuous operations in policing, the literature indicates that it can carry meaningful costs for sleep, health behaviors, relationships, and work functioning. The present study addressed this gap by examining officers' lived experiences of shift work and shift changes on second and third shifts, with attention to how these experiences were linked to subjective well-being within this sample.

In summary, while previous research has extensively examined the physiological and psychological effects of shift work (Nevels et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2022), there remained a gap in understanding the subjective well-being of police officers who work second and third shifts. Existing studies largely focused on quantifiable health outcomes, such as sleep disruption, stress hormone dysregulation, and increased risk of chronic illness. To get a fuller understanding, it is essential to capture the lived experiences of officers navigating the daily realities of shift work. Exploring how shift schedules affect mental health, family life, job satisfaction, and perceptions of the profession can also point to clear opportunities for targeted intervention.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to explore how active police officers experienced shift work and shift changes while working second and third shifts, and how they made meaning of these experiences in relation to subjective well-being. The present research study adopted a qualitative methodology, specifically employing the IPA to explore how shift work influenced interpersonal relationships, experiences, and overall perceptions.

The study prioritized participants' meaning-making and idiographic detail rather than estimating prevalence or testing causal relationships. The aim was to develop a nuanced account of how shift schedules shaped sleep, health routines, relationships, and perceptions of work and well-being within this sample. The data generated from this study were intended to address existing gaps in research related to the impact of specific work-related conditions on officers' subjective well-being, public perceptions, and views on their profession.

Findings were intended to contribute to the policing and occupational-health literature by describing how shift work is experienced in day-to-day life and by identifying patterns of convergence and divergence across participants' accounts. This chapter will detail the research design and rationale, data collection and analysis methods, potential threats to validity, and ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

The phenomenon of interest was officers' lived experience of shift work and shift changes while working second and third shifts. This included the meanings they

attributed to sleep, health behaviors, relationships, and work functioning. The research question was as follows: What are the lived experiences of officers working second and third shifts regarding the impact of shift work on their subjective well-being? The primary concept of this study was the influence of knowledge and the use of evidence-based practices to enhance the overall well-being of police officers working second and third shift.

The adoption of the IPA in this study facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences. Rajasinghe et al. (2024) stated that IPA is specifically designed to capture the richness and complexity of personal perceptions and interpretations. Providing me with valuable insights into how police officers experience shift work. Satchell et al. (2023) reported that by focusing on lived experiences, the study can uncover detailed information on how shift work influences officers' well-being, relationships, and overall life satisfaction.

A semistructured interview approach was utilized to elicit detailed experiential accounts while allowing me to follow participant-led meanings and clarify context when needed, consistent with IPA practice (see Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024). Rajasinghe et al. (2024) observed that open-ended questions in qualitative interviews are instrumental in obtaining comprehensive and detailed accounts of participants' experiences.

This level of detail is crucial for grasping the subtleties of how shift work affects various aspects of officers' lives, such as emotional health, relationships, and work-life balance. Quantitative studies, Satchell et al. (2023) held with their reliance on predefined

measures and scales, often miss this depth of data. By prioritizing participants' perspectives and interpretations, a qualitative approach ensured that findings were firmly rooted in the lived experiences of the individuals being studied. The participant-centric focus provided a more accurate and empathetic understanding of the impact of shift work, avoiding the limitations of externally imposed measures or assumptions.

In the interviews, Khuzaiyah et al. (2023) stated that questions should be structured around themes identified through the literature review. These include five information gathering questions, and one question under each theme, including general well-being, emotional impact, physical and mental health, relationships, daily life, perceptions and attitudes, personal experiences, meaning and interpretation, coping strategies, the effectiveness of shift work, work-life balance, and recommendations (see Appendix A).

Role of the Researcher

In IPA, the researcher is not a neutral recorder; interpretation is shaped through close engagement with participants' accounts and the analytic process. This study used reflexive practices (e.g., analytic memos, bracketing notes, and a documented audit trail) to make assumptions visible and to monitor how prior knowledge could shape questioning, rapport, and interpretation (see McIntosh, 2023; Nizza et al., 2021).

I brought personal insight into the study as a prior spouse of a police officer who had worked rotating shift schedules for over 7 years and as a current professional supporting law enforcement in community initiatives. The connection provides a unique understanding of the challenges officers and their families face, creating an atmosphere of

familiarity and trust that can encourage participants to share openly about their experiences. However, this familiarity also brought on a responsibility to consciously manage potential biases in interpreting the data.

To support reflexivity and reduce the risk of unexamined assumptions shaping interpretation, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout recruitment, interviewing, and analysis. Notes documented impressions, emotional reactions, and analytic decisions to make the interpretative process more detailed (see McIntosh, 2023; Nizza et al., 2021). Participants were recruited primarily through engagement in flyers, social media, and email outreach. During interviews, I paraphrased and asked clarifying questions to confirm understanding of participants' meanings in real time. The semistructured interview guide supported consistency across interviews while allowing participants to elaborate on experiences that mattered to them.

My professional role is to support law enforcement in community initiatives. I navigated several ethical considerations when recruiting participants for the study. It was essential to clearly communicate that participation was entirely voluntary, with no repercussions for those who chose not to participate. Maintaining transparency about my role and the study's purpose was critical to avoid any perception of authority over potential participants.

I upheld informed consent procedures, ensuring that participants fully understood the study's objectives, risks, and their rights. Additionally, I maintained professional boundaries, safeguarding against any overlap between personal and professional relationships during recruitment. To promote ethical integrity, I actively worked to

mitigate bias in participant selection and ensure that all confidentiality and privacy protections were upheld throughout the process.

Methodology

The study explored the lived experiences of police officers working second and third shifts and examined how they related those experiences to subjective well-being. IPA was selected because it supports detailed engagement with individual accounts, while acknowledging my interpretative role in making sense of those accounts (see Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024).

Casey et al. (2020) stated that convenience sampling is a form of purposive sampling. This was employed to select participants who met specific criteria aligned with the research focus. According to Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007), purposive sampling is especially effective for studies exploring lived experiences, interpretations, and assumptions.

To further enhance the diversity and reach of the participant pool, snowball sampling was used as a supplementary recruitment method. A snowball approach complemented purposive recruitment by allowing participants to share the study invitation with colleagues who met eligibility criteria and might be interested in participating.

Walden University IRB approval was obtained before recruitment began. The study procedures were designed to support voluntary participation, protect confidentiality, and generate rich, in-depth accounts suitable for IPA.

Participant Selection Logic

The population selected for this study comprises police officers working second and third shifts, with a focus on how these shifts impact their subjective well-being. In qualitative research, there is no required minimum sample size; instead, the study's validity hinges on criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as well as the specific needs of the research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

According to Burkholder et al. (2019), data saturation is achieved when two criteria are met: first, no new patterns or insights emerge from the data, and second, all phenomena relevant to the research questions are explained. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasized that the number of participants in a qualitative study can be adjusted as data collection progresses, based on the point of saturation.

The target population comprised active police officers with at least 5 years of experience who had worked second and/or third shift. A purposive sample of 11 officers ($N = 11$) participated, selected to support idiographic depth while allowing for cross-case interpretation across accounts. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit information-rich cases aligned with IPA's idiographic emphasis and interpretative focus (see Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024).

Police departments across the Midlands of South Carolina, in both rural and urban areas, were contacted to engage participants. Although the number of participants was not predetermined, I aimed to conduct between eight and 15 interviews, continuing until data saturation was reached. Participants were identified through the Freedom of Information

Act, which grants the public the right to request access to records held by federal government agencies.

This approach helped ensure that participation felt voluntary and not mandated by department leadership or outreach. Additionally, the same structured email invitation was sent to each potential participant in the recruitment process. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was strictly maintained as participant information was anonymized, stored securely, and no identifying details were disclosed outside the research team. All published findings were presented in a way that protected participant anonymity.

Following Walden University IRB approval, recruitment flyers were shared through professional networks and distributed to agencies and contacts who could circulate the study invitation. Interested officers contacted me directly and received the informed consent form. After consent was received, participants were offered multiple interview times, and once a time was confirmed, a secure Zoom link for their meeting was sent based on their availability. Interviews were scheduled for approximately 60-90 minutes and were audio recorded with permission from the participant.

Interviews were audio-recorded, and Otter.ai was used to assist in transcription during interview sessions. Manual transcription was conducted following the interview to verify the accuracy of auto-generated transcriptions. Reviewed transcripts were also sent to the participant after the interview to review and confirm the interview transcription to ensure accuracy, ensuring data validity and reliability.

Instrumentation

Semistructured interviews are suitable for IPA because they support depth and flexibility while keeping the discussion oriented toward the phenomenon of interest and the research question (Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024). Interviews were conducted via Zoom and followed a semistructured protocol aligned with the central research question. The protocol included consistent prompts and optional follow-up questions to support depth, clarification, and participant-led elaboration when relevant (see Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024).

I developed a total of 26 questions, 17 primary interview questions and an optional nine subsequent questions, to explore participants' general well-being, emotional impact, physical and mental health, the effects of shift work, and lived experiences. The questions were presented in a consistent sequence to ensure content validity across interviews. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded to capture responses accurately, and transcribed for detailed analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns.

Each interview began with a reminder of the participants' right to pause or stop at any time, acknowledging the sensitive nature of the topic. To build rapport and ensure comfort, the interview started with general questions before moving into deeper areas, with an emphasis on anonymity and respect for participants' perspectives. Participants were also informed that the recording would be used solely for data analysis.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection for the study involved several key steps aimed at ensuring effective recruitment and reliable data

collection. Participants were recruited through the Freedom of Information Act, which grants the public the right to request access to records held by federal government agencies.

I gathered publicly available email addresses from official department websites, as municipalities are required to make contact information accessible to the community. Departments were only asked to forward the invitation if they chose to, and the flyer was posted on social media. This approach ensured that outreach was conducted directly and independently by me, safeguarding the voluntary nature of participation and preventing any influence from department leadership.

Additionally, structured email invitations were sent based on professional guidelines to maintain clarity and professionalism. Interested participants who met the study criteria completed a brief screening questionnaire in Survey Monkey. If they met the criteria, they received the informed consent form to their designated email outlining the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures.

Upon agreeing to participate, each officer signed the informed consent form, which emphasized their right to withdraw at any time without any repercussions. Once consent was received via the participant's email reply of "I consent," I offered two or three potential dates and times for them to choose from at their convenience. Once the time and date were confirmed, an invitation to a password-protected Zoom meeting was sent to their identified email. I sent a reminder email 24 hours and 1 hour before each scheduled interview, allowing participants to adjust the meeting if necessary or to prepare

a distraction-free space where they can speak openly. Participants were encouraged to select a private setting to reduce interruptions and support open discussion.

Participant identifiers were removed from study materials, and each participant was assigned a study ID (e.g., E.F.). Interviews were conducted via Zoom, audio recorded, and took roughly 90 minutes. Transcription was assisted by Otter.ai and then reviewed by me against the audio for accuracy. At the end of the interview, participants were invited to clarify or expand on any responses.

Participants were also offered the opportunity to review the interview transcript after the first review from me to address corrections to statements, comments, or additional thoughts. I sent a follow-up email to the participant within 3 days following the interview with the interview transcription for review and approval.

Data Analysis Plan

In this phenomenological study, Moustakas's (1994) seven-step approach guided data analysis to identify themes and categories from participant data. Qualitative research focuses on patterns, causes, frequencies, and processes to interpret data, with an iterative approach providing an audit trail and in-depth analysis (Babbie, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Smith & Firth, 2011). Moustakas's steps are as follows:

1. Listing and grouping (horizontalization): Organized all relevant experiences.
2. Elimination and reduction: Filtered out irrelevant data to focus on essential aspects (invariant constituents).

3. Core theme creation: Grouped invariant constituents into core themes by clustering related elements.
4. Theme confirmation: Ensured themes and constituents aligned with the data set.
5. Individual textual descriptions: Used essential data and direct quotes to describe each participant's experience.
6. Individual structural descriptions: Included intellectual interpretations of the experiences.
7. Synthesis: Combined structural and textual descriptions for each participant, summarizing common meanings and essences.

Interviews were conducted individually to encourage detailed responses and recorded via Zoom. The recordings were transcribed using Otter AI, and themes were manually coded and then analyzed using NVivo. NVivo is a tool for organizing, coding, and analyzing large volumes of qualitative data (O’Kane et al., 2023). Participants were sent the reviewed transcript, and where feasible, participants were invited to refine any aspect of the interview after transcription. O’Kane et al. (2023) stated that qualitative data analysis tools can significantly aid in coding recorded interviews, providing structured support for identifying themes and patterns. Each tool offered unique features tailored to specific research needs, enhancing the overall accuracy and depth of the analysis.

The semistructured interviews balanced consistency across participants with flexibility to explore personal experiences. Participants were briefed on the study’s purpose, confidentiality, and informed that consent would be obtained. After interviews,

the data were segmented by key themes, coded, and refined to capture nuances. Codes were organized into broader themes to reveal patterns across participants, with quotes illustrating findings. The analysis integrated these themes into a narrative, addressing how shift work impacted police officers' subjective well-being and explored the meaning of their experiences.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research concerns whether the analysis is credible and well supported by the data. In IPA, quality is strengthened when analytic claims are grounded in participants' words and when the interpretative steps are transparent to the reader (Nizza et al., 2021). In this study, trustworthiness was addressed through strategies aligned with credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (see Ahmed, 2024; McIntosh, 2023).

To promote credibility and mitigate threats like researcher bias, reflexivity was essential. Nägel and Nivette (2022) stated that this involved critically examining personal biases, engaging in peer debriefing to gain diverse perspectives, and conducting member checking by allowing participants to review findings. Participant bias was also a concern, as individuals may have adjusted their responses due to social desirability or fear of judgment. Khuzaiyah et al. (2023) observed that this could be minimized through confidentiality assurances and open-ended questions that invite genuine responses.

Threats to interpretive quality included over-interpretation, selective attention, and insufficient linkage between claims and evidence. To mitigate the risks, the study used a semi-structured interview guide, consistent probing for clarification, and an

explicit audit trail to support accurate capture of participants' meaning (Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024). My presence during interviews was neutral and non-judgmental to avoid influencing participants' responses.

Specific strategies to enhance trustworthiness included maintaining reflexive notes, developing case-by-case analytic memos, and documenting analytic decisions through an audit trail. In addition, an idiographic approach was maintained by analyzing each case in depth before examining patterns of convergence and divergence across cases (Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024). Together, these practices supported transparency and strengthened the study's interpretive quality.

Ethical Procedures

Participant considerations were central to this qualitative study. Ethical practice requires respecting participants' rights, needs, and values, recognizing that discussing shift work experiences would involve sensitive professional and personal material. As a Walden University student, I obtained IRB approval (number 06-09-25-0660203) before beginning participant recruitment and data collection, adhering to Walden University's rigorous ethical guidelines. This process included submitting Form A to notify the IRB of the study and fulfilling all document requirements that addressed ethical concerns before receiving project approval.

Participants were informed of the study's purpose, data collection procedures, risks, benefits, and confidentiality protections. Recruitment materials and the consent process emphasized that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was provided via email, where they replied

“I consent” to ensure participation in the study and their understanding of their rights during the process.

Eligibility criteria included being an active police officer with five or more years of experience and having worked second and/or third shift. This study included 11 participants ($N = 11$) who met the criteria. Expected benefits included developing effective interventions to improve the well-being of officers on these shifts, raising awareness about shift work’s effects, reducing turnover, and promoting evidence-based practices for mental and emotional preparation in law enforcement.

To protect confidentiality, Zoom meetings were password-protected, and identifying information was removed from transcripts. Audio files and transcripts were stored in password-protected files accessible only to myself. Data were audio-recorded, transcribed using Otter.ai, and stored in secure, password-protected files. Only I had access to the data, which will be retained only as long as necessary for analysis before secure destruction in line with Walden University’s 5-year data retention policy.

A follow-up email was sent to the participant three days after the interview was completed, with the interview transcription for review and approval. Additionally, a 1-2-page summary was sent to all participants after the completion of the study. This debriefing, along with the opportunity to ask questions, reinforced the value of their contributions and ensured their comfort and confidence in the research process. The research data collection overview protocol was as follows:

- Completed demographic survey/participant screening (3-4 minutes).

- Provided informed consent to participate in the study (approximately 1 minute).
- Participated in an audio-recorded interview via Zoom (approximately 60-90 minutes).
- Reviewed a brief interview summary to add changes or additional thoughts (up to 15 minutes, when feasible).

Transcripts and audio recordings were stored on a password-protected device and backed up in secure, access-restricted storage. Study records will be retained for the required period and then securely destroyed in accordance with Walden University policy. All study records are retained for 5 years postpublication, after which they will be securely destroyed via shredding and HIPAA-compliant electronic deletion.

Summary

This phenomenological study examined the experiences of police officers working second and third shifts and their impact on subjective well-being. This chapter described the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, analytic approach, and ethical safeguards used to examine officers' lived experiences of shift work and shift changes on second and third shifts through IPA.

The study helped fill a gap in the research by providing insights into the effects of shift work on officers' mental health and daily experiences. The study utilized semistructured interviews to gather detailed, personal narratives. Participants, active officers with at least 5 years of experience working second or third shifts, shared their

perspectives through a series of 17 open-ended questions with an additional nine subsequent questions.

Interviews were recorded using a secure Zoom meeting room and professionally transcribed. Data analysis followed IPA procedures, including iterative reading and rereading, detailed initial noting (descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual), development of emergent themes within each case, and identification of patterns of convergence and divergence across cases while maintaining an idiographic focus (see Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2024). Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit an information-rich sample appropriate for IPA, prioritizing depth of meaning-making over population size.

Trustworthiness was supported through reflexivity, interview-level clarification, transparent documentation of analytic decisions, and the use of an audit trail. Ethical approval was obtained through Walden University's IRB, and confidentiality protections were applied throughout the study. Records will be kept securely for 5 years and then will be destroyed following HIPAA-compliant procedures. Chapter 4 presents the data and results, with an in-depth discussion to follow in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The study examined the lived experience of police officers working second and third shifts and explored how those schedules affected their subjective well-being. This chapter presents findings from semistructured interviews I conducted and analyzed using IPA. The analytic focus is idiographic; each participant's account was examined in detail before identifying patterns of convergence and divergence across participants.

Guided by IPA, the study posed one central research question: What are the lived experiences of officers working second and third shifts regarding the impact of shift work on their subjective well-being? The results reflect how officers made sense of working nonstandard shifts and how they connected shift work and shift changes to subjective well-being.

Setting

There were no personal or organizational events reported at the time of data collection that would have shaped participation interest. Participation was entirely voluntary, and departments had simply posted or forwarded the study flyer without selecting individuals or applying pressure. Recruitment used publicly available emails and social media so that outreach remained independent of agency leadership. Some officers also self-identified as potential participants and independently me to inquire about the study and express interest in participating.

Interested officers completed a short screening on SurveyMonkey, received consent materials that emphasized the voluntary nature of the study and the right to

withdraw at any time. A scheduled Zoom interview was set, and a semistructured interview took place at a mutually convenient time. These conditions suggested that the data reflected routine working life rather than reactions to recent personal issues or department issues.

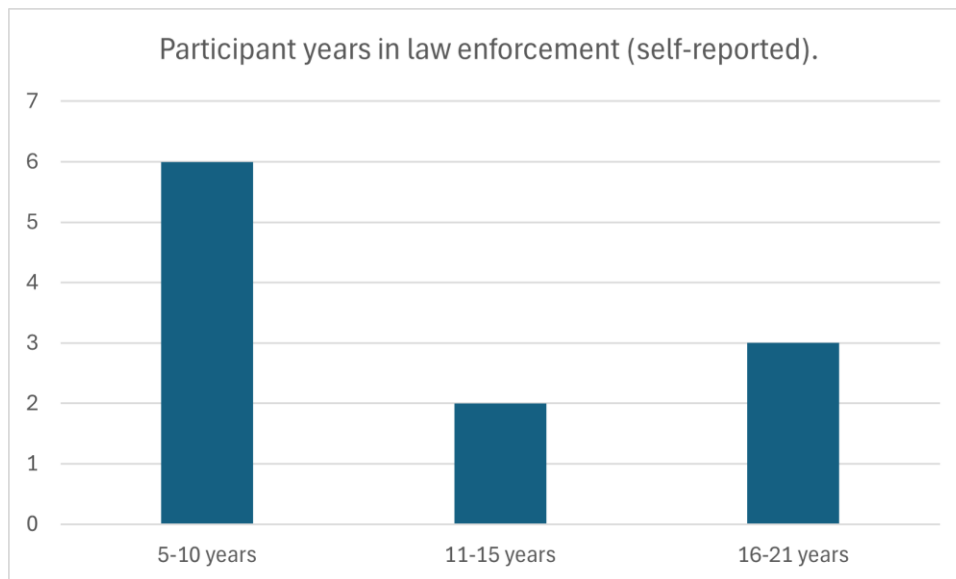
Participant Characteristics

The interview sample was diverse in gender, age, tenure, assignments, household context, and shift exposure. Table 1 summarizes the participant characteristics relevant to shift work exposure captured in the interviews (e.g., years in law enforcement, shift pattern, shift exposure, shift length exposure, and household context).

Table 1*Participant Characteristics Relevant to Shift Work Exposure*

Participant ID	Years in law enforcement	Shift pattern exposure	Shift exposure	Shift length exposure	Household context
A.D.	7	2-2-3 5-2	6am-2pm 2pm-10pm 10pm-10am 6pm-6am	8 - 12 hours	Children
A.N.	8	4-3 5-2 4-4	8am-5pm 2am-2pm 5pm-3am	10 hours	Partner, Children
A.P.	15	2-2-3	6pm-6am 6am-6pm	12 hours	Spouse
M.T.	21	2-2-3 3-1-3	3am-5pm 6am-6pm	8-12 hours	Spouse
P.W.	9	2-2-3	2am-2pm 7am-7pm 7pm-7am	12 hours	Parents, Children
R.F.	12	2-2-3	7am-7pm 6am-6pm 6pm-6am	12 hours	Spouse, Children
S.B.	7	2-2-3	7pm-7am 3pm-3am 8am-5pm	8-12 hours	Parents
S.C.	9	2-2-3	7am-7pm 7pm-7am	12 hours	Partner, Parents
S.T.	20	2-2-3	7am-7pm 7pm-7am 3am-3pm 3pm-3am	12 hours	Parents
S.S.	16	2-2-3	5am-5pm 5pm-5am	12 hours	Spouse, Children
W.T.	8	4-3	3pm-1am 5pm-3am 9pm-7am	10 hours	Spouse, Children

Figure 1 displays the participants' years in law enforcement. Overall, participants represented a mix of life stages and roles that aligned well with the study's focus on 2nd and 3rd shift policing.

Figure 1*Participant Years in Law Enforcement***Data Collection**

Data collection adhered closely to the Chapter 3 plan, with no substantive departures from the approved procedures. No new instruments were introduced, eligibility and consent materials remained unchanged, and all interviews were audio and video recorded as planned. Participants chose a date and time to participate in an interview via Zoom based on what worked with their professional and personal schedules. Some interviews were rescheduled due to last-minute duty changes, overtime, or connection issues.

To capture participants' exposure related to second and third shifts, professional characteristics were captured within the interview rather than by a separate presurvey. The interview guide was followed in full, although the order of questions and prompts was flexed to fit each participant's narrative to ensure natural transitions. Participants'

transcript checking turnaround was requested to be 3 days or less. However, it was extended upon request from officers coming off nights or managing family and professional roles. This gave participants an acceptable time to review validated transcripts. Interview notes were written during and immediately after each session, and journaling was completed the same day to identify any bias that may have been introduced. All recording, storage, incentives, and confidentiality practices were followed exactly as proposed.

There were no unusual circumstances during data collection. Interviews were scheduled and completed as planned, with only routine scheduling for shift changes. Technology functioned adequately with only minor connection complications. No participant had withdrawn after consenting to the interview, no interview was interrupted by a critical incident, and no signs of participant distress required a referral or mandated reporting. There was no data loss, security breaches, or platform outages. Additionally, incentives have been delivered as planned. With data collection complete, I moved into analysis, organizing the verbatim transcripts, interview notes, and analytic notes to develop themes using IPA.

Data Analysis

Each interview was read and reviewed several times and coded line by line using descriptive labels and themes to keep language close to participants' words. Analytic notes alongside the codes were then compared to each case to cluster recurring ideas into pattern groups and themes. Those clusters became provisional categories, which were

named, defined, and mapped to support citations. Each category was checked against the full transcript to confirm evidence.

A thematic document was created in Excel to show how categories related to one another, helping verify that it fit with the original transcripts and utilized specific quotations to support findings. After completing this for every participant, a cross-interview analysis was completed to compare categories by person and by shift type, noting conjunctions, meaningful differences, and combining overlapping categories into higher-order themes.

Discrepant cases were intentionally analyzed to strengthen the credibility and precision of the interpretative claims. In this study, discrepant cases included participants whose experiences ran counter to the dominant patterns. Such as officers who primarily worked night shift but periodically switched to day shift, or officers who were required to work opposite of their usual schedule for coverage, court, training, or temporary reassignment. Rather than being treated as anomalies, these accounts were examined as disconfirming evidence that tested early interpretations, prompted consideration of rival explanations, and refined the thematic structure (see Nizza et al., 2021; Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Focusing on both convergence and divergence, this approach supported a more nuanced account of shared experience. This approach also preserved meaningful variation, which helped sharpen claims by specifying boundary conditions. This included the circumstances under which shift work and shift change effects were less pronounced due to factors such as predictable transitions, stronger household support, greater

perceived schedule control, or more consistent recovery time between rotations (see Nizza et al., 2021; Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Effectiveness while working shift work varied based on experience and exposure. A few officers reported that permanent schedules or a stable 2:00 PM to 2:00 AM tour had fit their body clock and role. For example, DUI enforcement stated they had improved mood and performance with the fixed schedule. Some stated that their effectiveness and performance felt similar on days and nights. However, participants identified that their effectiveness on shift was perceived as less effective when they were in the transition period of shift change between nights and days.

Some participants reported strong organizational support, including flexible supervisors, access to counseling, on-duty workout allowances, and predictable coverage. These participants described fewer harms than peers who faced similar operational demands but had fewer workplace resources (see Rauschmayr et al., 2023). Moreover, officers without younger children or those with local family support reported less strain at home, suggesting that off-duty resources also shaped how demands were experienced and managed (see Rauschmayr et al., 2023).

Others reported reduced common nutrition barriers through consistent meal preparation and planning and therefore did not echo the view that healthy options were unavailable at night; instead, their accounts reflected how personal routines functioned as resources that buffered predictable constraints of night work (see Rauschmayr et al., 2023). These patterns highlight the role of both job and nonwork resources in shaping

how officers managed shift-related demands. Informing how the evidence was weighed and how trustworthiness was established in the analysis.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility reflected the extent to which the findings accurately represented participants' accounts, and I applied the credibility procedures described in Chapter 3. All interviews were audio-recorded, and each verbatim transcript was checked against the original recording to confirm accuracy and preserve meaning (see Eftekhari et al., 2024). Participants were then invited to review their transcripts as a form of transcript checking, with the option to correct mishearings or to clarify responses before coding so the analytic record reflected what they intended to communicate (see McKim, 2023).

I used descriptions and illustrative quotations to attach interpretations to the data. Additionally, I kept a reflective journal to surface any assumptions or biases I may have had. There was a maintained audit trail of coding decisions, category revisions, and theme naming. A peer debrief was also conducted, asking a knowledgeable colleague to review content, code themes, and to challenge the fit between excerpts and themes. Transferability referred to the extent to which readers could judge whether the findings might apply in similar contexts.

I supported transferability by giving enough concrete details about the officers' exposure to shift work. I described participants' tenure, roles, and shift histories, noting common patterns such as the 2-2-3 schedule and 6 pm to 6 am shift schedules. Additionally, the household and support circumstances were summarized that shaped off-duty life. The accounts situated within organizational conditions, such as staffing levels,

overtime expectations, access to counseling, and training schedules, were identified. Additionally, the use of well-placed quotations demonstrated how those conditions looked in practice.

I outlined inclusion criteria, cited boundaries, and set the geographic location to keep the scope clear. Divergent cases were examined so readers could understand how interpretations were refined (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because participant characteristics were explored during the interview, this helped to reduce the time commitment upon meeting the criteria and signing up for the interview.

Transferability was built into the interviews by coding and reporting contextual details directly from the narratives and providing sufficient descriptive detail for readers to assess fit across settings (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confidentiality was preserved by combining identifiers at the region and agency type level, which still left enough specificity for readers to compare within their settings. Additionally, I stated practical limits on transfer, noting that the sample featured experienced officers with substantial second and third shift exposure. Therefore, readers working with probationary or day-only officers would need to consider a proper fit before applying the results.

I supported the dependability of the study by using consistent procedures and a transparent record of decisions and results. The same constant language and interview guide were used for every participant. Each participant was made aware of the start and end of the recording, and interview notes were captured in a structured template, so context and probing were documented comparably. I kept an audit trail that logged interview dates, times, any rescheduling, file names, storage locations, codebook

worksheets, category definitions, and theme revisions. Additionally, analytic notes were completed that explained why codes were merged, split, or renamed.

In efforts to reduce “code drift,” I periodically reread earlier transcripts after coding later interviews and verified that code applications still fit the written definitions. I also ran a peer debrief to challenge the fit between excerpts and themes. Minor adjustments were made after situations arose from shift work, for example rescheduling due to schedule conflicts or connection issues. Additionally, I used a flexible order of prompts to follow participants and narratives. Each adjustment was logged with a rationale so that another researcher could follow the chain of evidence from raw data to final themes.

I supported confirmability by creating a clear chain of evidence from raw data to themes. I recorded and transcribed every interview, stored the audio and transcript under the participant's ID, and logged files and timestamps so another reviewer could retrace the work. I kept an audit trail that captured coding decisions, category definitions, merges, and splits with the rationale for any adjustments. I wrote reflexive before, during, and after coding notes to surface assumptions and biases about shift work, sleep, and family roles, then grouped those assumptions with interpreting quotes.

The linked categories and themes related to specific quotations were annotated so interpretations could be checked against the data. Participants were sent their transcripts to incorporate any corrections. Participants then returned the approved transcript to me to enhance the accuracy of their answers. Additionally, I used peer debriefing to challenge code applications and test alternative readings.

Results

Guided by the research question on how second and third shift work affected officers' subjective well-being, four themes stood out and were supported by consistent testimony. Four themes were developed across the 11 interviews: (a) living against the clock; (b) food, energy, and the body's rhythms; (c) the social cost and the protective role of close ties; and (d) organizational context and support structures. Theme labels are informative summaries of participants' meaning-making rather than fixed categories.

Living Against the Clock

Participants described shift work as living out of phase with typical social and bodily rhythms. Responses emphasized circadian strain, cumulative sleep debt, and the additional work required to stay alert, recover, and remain functional across rotating or night schedules (see James et al., 2023). Predictability had mattered more than the specific shift. Frequent flips were described as destabilizing, while permanent or longer blocks were linked to steadier sleep, mood, and overall functioning. One officer recalled, "1 month they switched from days and nights five times," which left them "very, very tired" and unsure whether they were "coming or going."

Another officer described a once-a-month, short-notice day assignment mandated by the department between night shift scheduled hours that yielded "2 hours of sleep" and an irritable, just get through it mindset. Another officer summarized their stance on being forced to cover days as "malicious compliance, maybe closer to a dead body than a functioning one." Even those who preferred nights still noted that predictable rotation and

no constant flipping had supported family rhythm and recovery. Participants also described shift work as living out of phase with typical social and bodily rhythms.

Many responses emphasized circadian strain, cumulative sleep debt, and the additional work required to stay alert, recover, and remain functional across rotating or night schedules. Circadian disruption had produced a repeatable early morning slump that shifted work from proactive to reactive and raised safety concerns (James et al., 2023). Officers on 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM shifts reported a significant slump around 3:00 in the morning, then relied on simple tactics such as “turning the music up,” “windows rolled down,” and “coffee to stay alert.”

An officer assigned to nights described flip weeks when going from nights to days, in which the officer would lie awake “staring at the ceiling” before taking a cold shower to “jolt” themselves awake into basic alertness. Officers repeatedly framed the back half of the night as maintenance mode rather than initiative, and several officers built in formal routines to help manage it. As officers described the constant effort required to stay functional against disrupted shift patterns, their responses also shifted beyond fatigue and alertness to the broader tradeoffs shift work imposed on everyday life.

Food, Energy, and the Body’s Rhythms

Participants linked shift timing to food access, appetite, and energy regulation (see Kosmadopoulos et al., 2020). Eating patterns were described as being shaped by limited healthy options during overnight hours, disrupted mealtimes, and the tradeoff between eating and sleep (see Kosmadopoulos et al., 2020). Some participants described skipping meals or delaying eating because sleep felt more urgent than food. While others described

reliance on available late-night options or preplanned meals to stay awake. However, nutrition problems were not universal. Some officers made and planned their meals to avoid the late-night fast-food trap.

The nighttime food environment had pushed nutrition towards scarcity or convenience, which participants linked to energy dips and longer-term health concerns. One officer said they “usually only ate once, maybe twice” on nights. However, without planning, they stated “all you have is fast food and gas stations,” but added they do not have the energy to meal prep after shifts. One officer noted that “before COVID, Walmart used to be 24 hours,” which allowed them to have alternative, healthier options. However, Walmart is no longer open 24 hours, and healthy food options are scarce without proper planning.

It was stated across interviews that primarily fast-food options and gas stations remained open during night shift, making them more susceptible to eating more convenient but unhealthy food. Several participants relied on energy drinks and fast food, which led to officers being put on medication due to high blood pressure or for mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. However, officers who planned meals did not report high blood pressure, health concerns, weight, or energy swings as others described. As participants described how night schedules narrowed food choices and disrupted appetite and energy regulation, their accounts also pointed to broader consequences beyond nutrition itself.

The Social Cost and the Protective Role of Close Ties

Participants frequently described shift work as shaping relationships by reducing shared time with family and friends, shifting responsibilities to partners, and complicating participation in social routines (see Granholm Valmari et al., 2023). At the same time, close relationships were described as protective, provided accountability, emotional support, and offered practical help (see Granholm Valmari et al., 2023). The shift work schedule structure had directly shaped family logistics and daily life. A night shift officer recounted canceling specialty care appointments that were “booked 3 or 4 months out” caused by an on-the-job injury, due to a forced overtime assignment.

Family strain varied by context, and officers without young children or with strong local support reported less conflict and fewer scheduled trade-offs. However, several participants connected nonstandard shifts to relationship strain, describing misaligned schedules, reduced availability, and changes in how household and parenting tasks were managed (see Granholm Valmari et al., 2023). Officers who had children described staying up after getting off duty the night before to cover morning routines, which compressed sleep to about 5-6 hours on good days. Officers also noted how they felt “isolated from their family and friends due to having to sleep while everyone is awake.”

Additionally, officers who were married struggled with built-up resentment, heightened stress, and more arguments with their partner due to their schedules and not being able to help around the house. One officer noted that they “sleep at their parents' house” because “the children are too loud during the day for them to sleep.” These

patterns captured how the shift work design flowed into appointments, childcare, and a sense of being present in the home. As these social costs accumulated, participants also pointed to how department policies, staffing practices, and supervisory flexibility either intensified strain or created room for recovery and support.

Organizational Context and Support Structures

Participants' meaning-making extended beyond personal routines to the organizational context in which shift work occurred (see Vila et al., 2002). Responses included perceptions of scheduling control, departmental culture, and the credibility and accessibility of wellness resources. Perceived effectiveness was driven primarily by shift rotation weeks. This was due to the flip of days to night due to their schedule requirements.

A DUI officer who was now on a permanent night schedule stated that the mandated 1-day rotation each month left them "completely useless that day," adding that the work required a level of focus they did not have because of exhaustion. Others described early shift productivity that faded after midnight, reinforcing that fatigue and situation, more than the label of day or night, explained drops in discretionary output.

Some participants described limited perceived control over scheduling and competing organizational demands. Others emphasized the role of supportive supervisors or available programs when implemented in ways officers trusted (see Vila et al., 2002). Officers also leaned on small routines with other shift members to buffer the dip around 3:00 AM. Officers stated that it was a good moment for "camaraderie" before finishing reports and shift change, or it helped bring some "energy" back due to the social context.

The data supported the research findings that predictable scheduling, protected recovery, and alignment between role demands and shift timing have been central to officers' well-being.

Discrepant cases strengthened the core claims and helped define where the findings were held. A few officers reported that permanent nights or a fixed (e.g., 2:00 PM to 2:00 AM) shift had fit their body clocks and roles better. Therefore, mood and performance had improved even as most peers struggled with flips. Several participants said effectiveness had felt similar on days and nights, with fatigue, call mix, and overtime, rather than the clock driving dips at 3:00 AM. Some officers noted that team camaraderie, counseling access, and a supportive department buffered the toll of nights even though they did not view the schedule itself as the main problem.

I used discrepant cases during cross-interview analysis to qualify interpretations. These cases also helped confirm subthemes related to role shift fit and support as protective factors. In doing so, the analysis clarified the bounds of each theme through counterexamples. Overall, findings showed that shift work outcomes were shaped not only by the clock but by how schedules were designed, supported, and buffered in practice.

Summary

The research question of how second and third shifts affected officers' subjective well-being has been answered through four themes that ran across all interviews. Predictable schedules mattered more than the specific shift, since frequent flips were

linked to poorer sleep, thinner patience, and lower discretionary effort. However, longer or permanent blocks supported steadier routines.

Circadian strain had shown up as a consistent early morning slump at 3 AM. Similarly, officers described the simple alertness tactics that worked in the moment but did not replace recovery sleep. The nighttime food environment had pushed many towards one meal a day, stimulants to stay awake, and unhealthy food, although strict meal prep had buffered this for some.

Overall, participants described shift work as a lived system of tradeoffs that shaped sleep, food, relationships, and perceptions of organizational support. Family life, appointments, and social ties had risen or fallen with the design of the shift. Effectiveness was shaped by the role-shift period, with specialty work often aligning best with effectiveness on nights.

Culture and local support had amplified or erased these pressures, so flexible supervisors, peer programs, and practical accommodations were associated with better well-being of officers. A small set of discrepancy cases had qualified these patterns, showing that permanent nights or strong support could soften the toll. Chapter 5 interprets these findings in relation to prior research, addresses limitations, and offers implications grounded in the data.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The study explored how second and third shifts shaped police officers' subjective well-being and used an IPA approach with semistructured, recorded interviews to capture their lived experiences. The study was conducted to inform readers of practical changes in scheduling, supervision, and wellness support for officers who worked outside of standard hours. This chapter interprets the findings from Chapter 4 in relation to the literature on police shift work, sleep disruption, and occupational well-being. The discussion remains grounded in participants' accounts while establishing those accounts within evidence on circadian misalignment, recovery, and the role of job and social resources.

Participants described cumulative fatigue and the need to actively protect sleep, consistent with evidence that nonstandard schedules disrupt circadian rhythms and reduce restorative sleep (see Ayorinde et al., 2025; Touitou et al., 2021). Circadian strain had shown up as a reliable early morning slump around 3 AM that eroded sleep, mood, and discretionary effort. Participant responses also align with research linking insufficient sleep to reduced attention and impaired emotional regulation, both of which can undermine subjective well-being and decision-making (see Viegas et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022). Across interviews, predictable schedules had served officers better than frequent flips.

Participants identified irregular meals, reliance on what was available overnight, and choosing sleep over eating. This reflected how shift work limited health-promoting

behaviors through both biological rhythms and limited access to healthy options. These findings were consistent with recent research describing appetite disruption, metabolic strain, and practical barriers to healthy eating among shift workers (Santre et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2022). The night food environment had pushed many officers toward under-eating or convenience foods unless meals were prepared in advance. Few participants described planning and bringing food as a key strategy for protecting energy and avoiding fast food. Overall, nutrition patterns appeared to be shaped less by preference and more by the structure and timing of the shift.

Participants described relationship strain through reduced shared time and shifting household responsibilities. This was consistent with research showing that nonstandard schedules complicate family routines and reduce opportunities for shared activities that sustain social support (Cheung & Chi-Mei Li, 2022; Opoku et al., 2023). At the same time, close ties functioned as a protective resource when partners and family members provided understanding, flexibility, and accountability. Family life and everyday logistics depended on which shift they were on. For some, this included extra stresses of childcare, appointments, and social time.

Participants' meaning-making emphasized perceived control, especially around scheduling predictability and recovery opportunities. Mixed descriptions of formal wellness support suggested that credibility, confidentiality, and organizational culture influenced help-seeking, not only the existence of programs (see Di Nota et al., 2021; Nizza et al., 2021). Shift change requiring a specific role mattered, specifically with specialty work. This aligned better with the night shift, as there was more to keep officers

alert. Officers who experienced organizational support stated that flexible supervisors, peer support, and access to counseling had softened the toll. Discrepant cases had shown that permanent nights could work well when predictability and support were strong.

Interpretation of the Findings

Implications are appropriately tentative given the small, idiographic sample ($N = 11$). Departments may benefit from increased scheduling predictability, where feasible, and from reducing avoidable postshift demands that interfere with recovery time. Participants' accounts also suggest value in support that officers experience as credible and confidential. This included peer-informed options and normalized check-ins that reduced barriers to help-seeking (see Nizza et al., 2021; Somers & Terrill, 2022).

The findings from this study largely confirmed what the literature described in Chapter 2 about sleep, health, social support, and work-family strain (see Boivin et al., 2022; Sørengaard et al., 2021). Furthermore, the study offered knowledge with schedule-specific details and role-shift fit within the results, as it impacted shift effectiveness. Reports of the consistent early morning slump at 3:00 AM, reduced initiative after midnight, and difficulty sleeping during daylight hours aligned with the RRTS claims. These claims include circadian misalignment and reduced REM, which undermines cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, recovery, and chronic sleep loss (Boivin et al., 2022; Sørengaard et al., 2021).

Consistent with social support theory, officers who described flexible supervisors, peer programs, and dependable family assistance with everyday activities described less overall strain (see Patterson, 2003). These findings matched evidence that high-quality

support buffered work-related stress and improved coping (see Patterson, 2003). The importance of work-family conflict in the interviews confirmed prior findings that shift work reduced family contact, increased isolation, and intensified conflict when support thinned (see Granholm Valmari et al., 2023).

The data also fit the broader policing research. Data have shown that long, rotating, and unpredictable schedules are linked to poorer well-being and higher strain (Scholarios et al., 2017). The current study extended the research by indicating that schedule predictability, more than the shift itself, appeared to shape outcomes. In particular, stable schedules supported recovery and helped reduce strain.

Interviews also added details that the research had implied, including how night food environments pushed officers towards under-eating or convenience foods unless they meal prepped (see Kosmadopoulos et al., 2020). Additionally, forced shift coverage that overlapped into the next schedule wore on the officers' overall performance, especially in specialty roles. Similarly, mandatory training was conducted on their days off, which reduced recovery time (see Riedy et al., 2021). Officer responses clarified specific ways that schedule design shaped well-being. As a result, this advanced the broader literature's gap for researchers to spell out the mechanisms (see Scholarios et al., 2017).

Discrepant cases acceptably disconfirmed a simple "nights are worse" narrative by showing that permanent nights could work well when predictability and support were strong (see James et al., 2023; Scholarios et al., 2017). These counterexamples helped define the bounds of the findings and reduced overgeneralization across roles and

settings. Responses also reinforced social support theory's claim that support had buffered strain and strengthened coping (see Patterson, 2003). Responses pointed to actionable targets for policy and supervision, including predictable scheduling, protected recovery time, and credible support options.

Interpreting the results from theory, the findings aligned with RRTS and social support theory. The analysis did not extend beyond what participants reported. RRTS helped explain why officers repeatedly described a predictable early morning slump and difficulty obtaining restorative sleep after night shifts. This aligns with evidence that shift work disrupts circadian timing and reduces recovery opportunities (Boivin et al., 2022).

Circadian misalignment and shortened recovery time diminished mood, attention, and initiative. This is consistent with police-focused evidence linking sleep disruption with impaired cognitive and emotional functioning at work (Sørengaard et al., 2021). Participants described this period as "maintenance mode" policing late at night. Social support theory clarified why officers who reported flexible supervisors, dependable peers, and reliable family support also described less strain from the same shifts (Patterson, 2003).

The social resources were identified to have helped buffer the impact of sleep loss and scheduling friction. This ties in with the evidence that social support reduces stress among police officers (Patterson, 2003). Across interviews, outcomes were attached to a resource demand balance more than to any single shift being universally "better," therefore aligning with the research showing that schedule conditions and predictability shape well-being (see Scholarios et al., 2017).

Discrepant cases also narrowed the claims. Some officers did well on permanent nights when predictability and support were strong. The IPA design with experienced officers allowed a range of shifts and experiences to be examined. However, the study included no psychological measures or longitudinal data. Interpretations stayed at the level of participants' reported experiences, and conditional language was used to avoid generalizing beyond the sample and scope.

Limitations of the Study

This study had limitations consistent with IPA (see Smith & Nizza, 2022). The sample included 11 active police officers ($N = 11$). This supported idiographic depth but limited generalization beyond this context (see Smith & Nizza, 2022). Not all demographic items were stated consistently across transcripts, which limited contextual comparisons. Several additional limitations to trustworthiness arose during implementation (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The design was cross-sectional and relied on self-report without psychological or organizational collaboration. Recall error, mood at the time of the interview, and social desirability, especially around performance safety and family conflict, remained possible (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) even if it was not identified. Participant characteristics were not identified upon consent to participate. The context was only captured in the interviews themselves. That choice supported participation but reduced overall consistency; it also made some comparisons less precise.

Analytic notes were led by one researcher with one peer debrief rather than full inter-code reliability or formal auditing (see Smith & Nizza, 2022). This increased the

importance of reflexivity and an audit trail, but it still left room for interpretative drift (see Smith & Nizza, 2022). Participant checking was provided to all participants. Approved transcripts were returned based on their shift schedule and attentiveness towards checking the full transcript (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Therefore, not every transcript may have been thoroughly reviewed to confirm statements. Additionally, confidentiality protections required masking agency and local details for each participant. While this preserved autonomy, it limited transferability by withholding some contextual specifics (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Recommendations

Recommendations for future research built on this study's depth and shift diversity while addressing its limits (see Smith & Nizza, 2022). Future work could examine how meaning-making differs across specific schedule types across career stages, and in relation to organizational factors such as perceived fairness and autonomy (see Scholarios et al., 2017). Studies that pair idiographic interviews with short-term sleep and fatigue measures may help connect lived experience to recovery patterns while retaining participants' interpretative accounts (Boivin et al., 2022). This approach could strengthen alignment between narrative accounts and biological timing.

Larger, purposive samples across regions and agency types, including day-only and specialty unit officers for contrast groups, would have strengthened comparisons (see Smith & Nizza, 2022). Longitudinal designs that followed officers across several rotation cycles or before and after policy changes would have clarified how predictability, flip buffers, and overtime patterns accumulated over time (see Riedy et al., 2021; Scholarios

et al., 2017). Additionally, partner or family interviews would have triangulated reports on home life without overburdening officers (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This could also clarify how scheduled demands are negotiated within households.

Furthermore, programmatic intervention studies that piloted predictable scheduling, protected transition days, evening training options, and on-duty workout allowances would strengthen results. Using pre- and post-measures tied to sleep, mood, and self-reported performance would also add to this study (see Vila et al., 2002). This type of design could test whether targeted scheduling changes produce measurable improvements. Finally, future analysis would have benefited from multiple coders and a brief standardized demographic form (see Smith & Nizza, 2022). These additions would have stayed within the study's qualitative scope while improving comparison and transparency.

Implications

Grounded in methodology and participants' interviews, the study pointed to several avenues for positive social change. At the individual level, predictable rotations, brief buffers when routine flips were unavoidable, and protected recovery time for sleep could have supported mood and day-to-day functioning (see Scholarios et al., 2017; Vila et al., 2002). Practical supports such as on-duty workout allowances, a night stipend, and meal prep planning resources were also described as helpful options (see Kosmadopoulos et al., 2020; Vila et al., 2002). These suggestions aligned with evidence that schedule structure and recovery opportunities matter for safety and health in policing and other shift-work settings (see Vila et al., 2002).

At the family level, having schedule transparency a month or more in advance would be beneficial (see Scholarios et al., 2017). Routine check-ins after night shifts with a partner or spouse could support coordination and reduce conflict tied to misaligned hours (see Patterson, 2003). Agency dissemination of information about childcare options could also ease logistics for families managing nonstandard work schedules. Participants linked these stress points to mandated shifts that conflicted with their assigned schedule. This aligned with the research showing that unpredictability and low control can amplify work-life strain (see Scholarios et al., 2017).

At the organizational level, participants identified that supervisors who respected recovery and time off mattered. Evening training options and peer programs were also described as supports officers trusted (see Patterson, 2003; Vila et al., 2002). Limiting short-notice day coverage for night-shift workers would have addressed the exact pressures officers described (see Vila et al., 2002). At the broader policy level, agencies and funders could have prioritized guidance that favored schedule predictability, longer transition days after nights, and access to confidential counseling (see Scholarios et al., 2017; Vila et al., 2002). Community partnerships for healthy late-night food options could also address the nutrition gaps officers identified (see Kosmadopoulos et al., 2020).

These implications remained conditional and experience-based. Results reflected practical changes that participants said had mattered in their work and home lives. The IPA semistructured interview design showed that officers could articulate pathways from schedule design to daily life (see Smith & Nizza, 2022). This suggests future work can add small, standardized adjustments without losing nuance (see Smith & Nizza, 2022).

The patterns around a predictable early morning slump, food access after 9:00 PM, and forced day coverage embedded in night assignments also indicated clear candidates for mixed methods in larger studies (see Boivin et al., 2022; Kosmadopoulos et al., 2020). Theoretically, results reinforced RRTS by linking circadian misalignment with attention and mood (see Boivin et al., 2022). Social support theory remained useful in explaining why flexible supervision, peer programs, and family help appeared to buffer the same schedules (see Patterson, 2003).

Identified themes yielded testable suggestions within the scope of the study. For example, longer blocks or protected transition days could align with better self-reported sleep and functioning (see Scholarios et al., 2017; Vila et al., 2002). Late-night food scarcity could also track with under-eating or convenience foods unless officers prepared meals (see Kosmadopoulos et al., 2020).

The recommended practical steps that agencies and officers could have taken without stepping beyond this study's scope included taking the lived experience behind shift work seriously (see Smith & Nizza, 2022). Supervisors could have posted schedules 4 to 6 weeks in advance and limited day-to-night flips (see Scholarios et al., 2017). Agencies could also have guaranteed 1 or 2 additional days to transition before and after an unavoidable switch (see Vila et al., 2002). Forced day coverage or training for individuals on permanent nights could be moved to late afternoon or evening, or offered in a recorded format, so recovery time stays intact (see Vila et al., 2002). Departments could also protect short, call-ready workout blocks during shifts to support health and wellness (see Vila et al., 2002).

Additionally, departments could have supported basic kitchen equipment or meal prep resources for late-night healthy options through the department or a nearby vendor (see Kosmadopoulos et al., 2020). Family logistics could be mitigated by encouraging shared calendars and consistent pre- and post-shift routines (see Patterson, 2003). Planned appointments during day blocks and batched errands in the afternoon could also help preserve sleep. These actions stayed conditional and experience-based. They matched what participants said had helped or hurt in day-to-day work and home life.

Conclusion

Participants described working second and third shifts as a daily negotiation of recovery, food, energy, relationships, and organizational context (see Kosmadopoulos et al., 2020; Scholarios et al., 2017). Their responses suggest that well-being is shaped not only by shift timing but also by predictability, recovery opportunities, and credible support (see Boivin et al., 2022; Patterson, 2003). These findings can inform scheduling practices and department resources that better align with officers' lived experiences on nonstandard shifts (see Vila et al., 2002). The results also confirm prior policing research that links schedule conditions with health, functioning, and work-life strain (see Scholarios et al., 2017).

The study showed that the schedule itself had been the decisive driver for well-being, not whether someone worked days or nights (see Scholarios et al., 2017; Vila et al., 2002). When routines were predictable, recovery time was protected, and roles were aligned with the hours officers worked, participants described better sleep, steadier mood, and more room for family life (see Patterson, 2003; Scholarios et al., 2017).

When unexpected schedule flips were frequent, mandated training cut into next-day recovery, and late-night food options were scarce, officers reported fatigue, shorter patience, and a drift toward survival habits (see Boivin et al., 2022; Kosmadopoulos et al., 2020). These patterns align with evidence that circadian disruption, reduced recovery, and constrained night-time food access can compound strain (see Boivin et al., 2022; Kosmadopoulos et al., 2020).

Supportive supervisors, departments, cohesive teams, and simple on-shift resources had consistently softened the load (see Patterson, 2003; Vila et al., 2002). The voices from this study identified that predictable scheduling and practical support mattered more than labels (see Scholarios et al., 2017). Small, specific adjustments in how shifts were planned and how support was offered could produce meaningful gains without changing core job demands (see Vila et al., 2002). This remained consistent with participants' emphasis on feasibility and day-to-day impact.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Information Gathering:

- How long have you been working a shift-based schedule?
- Can you describe your current shift rotation (e.g., fixed, rotating, 2-2-3)?
- Who makes up your immediate household or family support?
- Do you prefer working day shifts or night shifts, and why?
- How would you describe the culture within your department?

2. General Well-Being:

- Describe your overall well-being while working second and third shifts?

3. Emotional Impact:

- How do you feel emotionally when you are on shift work compared to working standard hours?

4. Physical and Mental Health:

- How has working second and third shifts affected your physical health?

Impact of Shift Work:

1. Relationships:

- How does working shifts affect your relationships with family, friends, and colleagues?

2. Daily Life:

- How do your shift patterns influence your daily routines and activities outside of work?

3. Perceptions and Attitudes:

- How do you perceive the effectiveness of shift work in relation to your job performance?

Lived Experiences:

1. Personal Experiences:

- Describe a typical day or week for you while working second and third shifts?

2. Meaning and Interpretation:

- How do you interpret the impact of shift work on your overall quality of life?

3. Coping Strategies:

- What strategies do you use to manage the challenges of working nonstandard shifts?

General Research Questions:

1. Effectiveness of Shift Work:

- In your opinion, how effective is shift work in fulfilling the needs of your role compared to traditional work hours?

2. Work-Life Balance:

- How do you manage the balance between your work and personal life with your current shift schedule?

3. Recommendations:

- What changes would you suggest to improve the shift work system for better well-being and job satisfaction?