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## Narratives from Law Enforcement Officers who Leave Policing

Hector Rene Matascastillo  
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# Walden University

College of Allied Health

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Hector Rene Matascastillo

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2026

Abstract

Narratives from Law Enforcement Officers who Leave Policing

by

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MSW, Augsburg University, 2010

BA, Concordia University, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

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May 2026

## Abstract

Beginning in May 2020, a national exodus of law enforcement officers (LEOs) from the profession occurred. There has been speculation about the causes, including social unrest and trauma, while some claim that there has always been this level of attrition. The purpose of this study was to capture the narratives of LEOs regarding what motivated them to leave the profession after May 2020 and before achieving their retirement goals. The theoretical lens of general strain theory guided this study, as it posits that people under great strain resort to options that they would not usually consider, such as leaving the profession of law enforcement before they anticipated doing so. Twenty participants were interviewed about their motivation for leaving the profession. They were asked about their experience of mental health before, during, and after social unrest, and their experience after leaving the profession, using an interview questionnaire. The first round of coding revealed multiple topics using line-by-line coding using NVivo software on the transcripts from the 30- to 50-minute interviews. Axial coding revealed themes that led to four primary reasons motivating LEOs to leave the profession early: lack of support from their state, county, and local government officials, lack of support from their agency administrations, the way media, government officials, and their administrations spoke pejoratively about them, and the loss of community support during social unrest. The data suggest that by addressing these issues through thoughtful mitigation, mental health professionals can inform the law enforcement profession and impact the loss of law enforcement officers, in turn decreasing cost to the community and increasing safety for communities in which there is a healthy law enforcement presence.

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## Dedication

To the men and women of the law enforcement profession, I dedicate this paper. I had the privilege of interviewing 20 people who significantly impacted my life. I pray that my sons grow up to be the kind of person you are and that they live life with the passion you modeled through your actions on behalf of an often-ungrateful nation. When what has been done in darkness is brought into the light, I will give testimony of what I have witnessed. I will then be a witness to the redemption of those who are called the peacemakers, the sons and daughters of God.

## Acknowledgments

My priorities are well known to my family members, friends, and colleagues. I see God as always, not first, then my wife, then my sons, and then my work/health. In this case, my health took a back seat to this PhD process, but that was temporary. I acknowledge God's guidance, my wife's support, my boys' patience, and the support of my staff and colleagues. I would also like to acknowledge the patience, perseverance, and guidance of Dr. Benita Stiles-Smith, Dr. Michael B. Johnson, Dr. Yoly Zentella, and Dr. Alethea Baker. It has been a long and arduous journey to reach this point, and I acknowledge that it probably took me longer than most. You didn't bail on me, and I will always appreciate that.

Throughout this process, I learned a great deal about what is possible. I was told at the Daniel Amen Clinic in Chicago that they do not understand how I could have completed any degree program, much less a Ph.D., given the significance of my traumatic brain injuries from combat. I have never been much for believing the messages that people give others about why they should not be able to do something. I am a little stubborn that way. This was hard work. I made it into my 50s, experienced betrayal by three people I once trusted, took over a company as its owner, remarried, was accepted into a new family, lost significant relationships, experienced a short period of homelessness, and got through it all. None of it, however, was without God and His servants who stood by to support me.

We all earned this together. Thank you all so very much—time to get to work.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This study aimed to capture the narratives of law enforcement officers who left the police force after May 25, 2020, but before their retirement point (i.e., premature retirement). Research on law enforcement is predominantly quantitative, and qualitative studies are not focused on firsthand accounts of turnover motivations among law enforcement officers. The high rate of law enforcement attrition has continued to spread throughout the United States and appears to be isolated to this country (Adams, et al., 2023; Adams, Nix, et al., 2023; Grunwald, 2024; Lancaster, 2024; S. Mourtgos & Adams, 2021; Nestor, 2024; Pagones, 2022; PERF, 2021; Woodhouse, 2023). Articles written about this problem over the last 4 years have cited workers' compensation claims due to psychological injuries (Associated Press, 2020). This chapter discusses the background of this problem and why this study is necessary. I explain how research helped me better understand the problem and how the research question was developed. I introduce the theoretical constructs that informed my development of the study and the lens through which the problem was viewed. The chapter then discusses the study's terms, limitations, and the significance of researching this problem for the psychological, academic, law enforcement, and policy-making communities.

### **Background**

Research has been conducted on occupational strain among law enforcement professionals (Moon & Jonson, 2012). More recent research reviewed factors that affect officer effectiveness in metropolitan areas (Tengpongsthorn, 2017). Job satisfaction among police officers has been a topic of study in several recent studies (Duran et al., 2020; Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Nevers, 2019; Pratap, 2016; Queirós et al., 2020; Wu &

Wen, 2019). Post-traumatic stress disorder among officers (Beagley et al., 2018; Faulkner et al., 2020; Garbarino & Magnavita, 2019) has become more focused over the last 5 years. Police use of force (Fryer, 2019; Kivisto et al., 2017) has the most significant amount of research looking at how officers respond to mental health crises (Akins et al., 2016; Bratina et al., 2020; Brennan et al., 2016; Comartin et al., 2019; Compton et al., 2017; Evangelista et al., 2016; Frederick et al., 2018; Helfgott et al., 2016; Hoffman et al., 2016; Horspool et al., 2016; Loong et al., 2016; Morabito et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2018; Ressler & Terrill, 2017; Scantlebury et al., 2017; Steadman & Morrisette, 2016; Watson & Wood, 2017; Wood et al., 2017; Wood & Watson, 2017; S. R. Zauhar, 2019).

Only a few studies came close to addressing post-event stress (Beagley et al., 2018) and retention (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015; Suboch et al., 2017). However, none of these presented the officers' perspective during a post-event exodus and premature retirement. Studies depicting police behavior focused mainly on the use of force (Engel et al., 2022; Fryer, 2019; Morabito et al., 2017; Ressler & Terrill, 2017). Studies that focused on behaviors associated with police stress included their drinking patterns and smoking as well as interventions for the behaviors (Richmond et al., 1999), police suicide (Bishopp & Boots, 2014; D. L. Jones, 2021; Krayner et al., 2023; Larned, 2010; Shaheen, 2023; Violanti, 2004), relationship issues (Anderson & Lo, 2011), and mental health and wellness as a result of the profession (Craw, 2022; Department of Justice, 2023; DOJ, 2023; Fleischmann et al., 2018; Gall, 2022; Lees et al., 2019; Van Hasselt et al., 2008; VanHasselt et al., 2003). Turnover intent is a significant area of research, but none of the articles discussed mental health motivations that preceded leaving the profession before retirement. Turnover intent is not synonymous with

“motivation” and is specific to law enforcement research. A few researchers documented officers’ perspectives on their exposure to trauma using quantitative methodologies. The rationale used was that officers are reluctant to disclose their trauma exposure as a problem (Craw, 2022; Fleischmann et al., 2018; Lees et al., 2019; Rentmeesters & Hermans, 2023). With the ongoing and growing number of officers citing post-traumatic stress disorder as a reason to leave or submit workers’ compensation claims (Associated Press, 2020), qualitative research is needed to better understand officers’ motivations to leave the profession (Adams, 2019; Arter, 2008; Bishopp et al., 2019; Emeriau-Farges et al., 2019; Harger, 2020; Howes et al., 2015; Queiros et al., 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

Since May 2020, there has been an increase in the loss of officers who leave the force before retirement. Historical data show that recruiting and retaining officers have been challenging throughout law enforcement history (Wilson et al., 2010). The 1990s introduced the crime bill, which led to a wave of recruitment (Wilson et al., 2010), for which some of the current attrition is accounted for through retirement. There was a spike in resignations in 2008, with 54% of officers resigning from smaller agencies, but there is no indication that they went to other agencies (Reaves, 2012). After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, there was an increase in demand for law enforcement officers and for community-based policing techniques to thwart other attacks (Wilson, 2022). Still, there has not been an exodus like the one in 2020 and the subsequent years, with officers leaving the profession altogether (Wilson, 2022). Numerous articles document the statistics and challenges facing police recruitment and retention, including excessive workload, stress, strained relationships with administration, and erosion of public trust

(PERF, 2023). Adams et al. (2023) documented the statistical reality that the current exodus is a significant problem, and there is a lack of understanding of its future implications.

Still, there are no first-hand accounts of the reasons why officers are leaving before retirement after the events of May 2020 related to their mental health. The riots and civil unrest beginning in May 2020 sparked several experiences that may contribute to this problem. One of these is the number of police officers who left and continue to leave their law enforcement profession due to psychological injuries such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Associated Press, 2020; League of Minnesota Cities, 2020). The departure of police officers is augmented by decreased police recruitment, resulting in significant gaps in law enforcement protection (Bonds, 2024). A decrease in the number of officers reduces the law enforcement officer's ability to deter crime proactively due to the added stress resulting from a reduced police force (Adams et al., 2023; Mourtgos & Adams, 2021). Any overloaded law enforcement system can lead to additional stress experienced by law enforcement agencies in other jurisdictions (Boylan, 2022). Additionally, state and city financial systems, through mechanisms such as workers' compensation, can become overly burdened (Adams et al., 2023).

Qualitative research on this problem since 2020 has been sparse. One researcher viewed the situation from an economic perspective, stating that the exodus is less pervasive than cited by the media (Grunwald, 2024). A reporter appeared to contradict themselves when they cited Grunwald (2024) and stated that the riots did not cause the exodus, yet noted that an exodus occurred (Lancaster, 2024). This can confuse readers and mislead the public, as Lancaster (2024) included quotes from Grunwald that could

not be tested (e.g., variables of social hostility or leader criticisms). Grunwald examined the overall impact of the intensity of local protests on officer attrition but found no correlation between the two. Instead, he suggested that the pandemic, pay, benefits, and better work environment were potential reasons, but did not test for those variables.

Multiple articles with different perspectives cite the exodus of police officers. Another article blamed leadership for officer attrition but provided no research to support this claim (Nestor, 2024). Another reporter identified the potential legal actions that could be taken against an officer should that officer have to shoot someone (Woodhouse, 2023). One study by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF, 2021) received 195 responses from officers across the United States, focusing on attrition and recruitment trends from 2019 to 2020 compared to 2020 to 2021. In the PERF study, police officers could give their impressions on attrition. Officer comments primarily addressed low recruitment numbers. Nothing was mentioned regarding the exodus phenomenon. The Fraternal Order of Police, not related to PERF, was the only group to mention stress, anxiety, and overall psychological health of officers as an issue about officers leaving, but cited no research (Pagones, 2022). Valid research is much needed in this area (Adams et al., 2023).

The job of law enforcement officers is demanding, requiring strategies to deal with emotional aspects of the work (Gilmartin, 2018), psychological and behavioral reactions to trauma (Conroy & Orthmann, 2014), and significant amounts of stress (Territo & Sewell, 2019). In 2020, hundreds of officers left their positions due to PTSD and other mental health reasons (Associated Press, 2020; Maxouris, 2021) following the civil unrest and public rioting that occurred during that year. Thousands more have since

retired prematurely (Mourtgos et al., 2020). According to a wellness coordinator officer for the Minneapolis Police Department, social unrest during the 2020 riots led officers to question their trust in the community they served and the administration that led them (Seidl, 2021). Seidl (2021) argued that officers started leaving the profession due to these two reasons. Some officers cited psychological health reasons for their decisions (League of Minnesota Cities, 2022). Eventually, according to Seidl, some former officers began to rely on mental health professionals to help them enhance their claims of psychological health injuries, leading to their leaving law enforcement early.

One study, which included participants from two police jurisdictions in South Central Virginia, employed qualitative methods to investigate the phenomenon known as the “Ferguson Effect,” also referred to as the “defunding of the police” movement (Adams, 2019). However, this and other studies have not included first-hand narrative accounts from those who left policing. Most of the literature on policing tends to be quantitative and focuses on job stress before events since 2020 (Duran et al., 2020; Emeriau-Farges et al., 2019; Faulkner et al., 2020; Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Jabeen et al., 2020; Nevers, 2019; Queirós et al., 2020; Wu & Wen, 2019). There is a lack of qualitative research that depicts the narratives of law enforcement officers following major riots or unrest. Qualitative research is necessary to foster a deeper understanding of officers’ emotional and psychological well-being (Adams, 2019; Arter, 2008; Bishopp et al., 2019; Emeriau-Farges et al., 2019; Harger, 2020; Howes et al., 2015; Queiros et al., 2020). It is important to know why officers, in their own words, leave their community service roles.

## **Purpose**

This study aimed to explore the firsthand experiences of police officers who left the field before their retirement and after May 25, 2020. I employed an interpretive research paradigm, given that I conducted interviews with participants. The idea came from information stating that in Minnesota alone, where the death of George Floyd sparked rioting, which led to hundreds of officers leaving in significant numbers (Associated Press, 2020) for claims of PTSD, over \$47 million was spent between 2020 and 2022 on workers' compensation, and 82% of this was paid to former law enforcement officers for psychological injuries (League of Minnesota Cities, 2022). These officers' narratives have not been studied for themes and concepts as to their motivations. The problem is not isolated to Minneapolis, as the United States has experienced an ongoing departure from law enforcement since 2020 (Adams, Mourtgos, et al., 2023; Grunwald, 2024; Mourtgos & Adams, 2021; Pagones, 2022; PERF, 2021; Woodhouse, 2023). A better understanding of these causal factors can help mental health professionals intervene and the relevant forces be more proactive about what can be done with the officers' work cultures and environments.

## **Research Question**

What motivations do police officers give for leaving their profession pre-retirement in 2020 or later?

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study was grounded in general strain theory (GST) as a framework for the problem. GST can give a perspective to the psychological health variables that lead to leaving the law enforcement job early. VMerton (1938) originally proposed GST to

examine why people turn to crime when the resources to get what they need are not available. Cohen (1955) modified GST to explain the formation of subcultures that turn to crime to meet social and psychological needs. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) expanded on this theory by suggesting that when people lack legitimate means to meet their social and psychological needs, they turn to illegitimate means due to the perception that they are blocked from accessing the necessary resources. Agnew (1955, 1992, 2015) posited that there are psychological reasons why someone would turn to illegitimate or criminal behavior. They stated that there are emotional underpinnings for why a person would turn to criminal behavior (Brezina, 2017).

GST has been used to attempt to explain why police officers might consider death by suicide (Bishopp & Boots, 2014; Swatt et al., 2007) or other problematic behaviors related to anger, depression, and anxiety, such as alcohol troublesome alcohol consumption (Swatt et al., 2007). The elements that GST cites (i.e., lack of community support and resources, inability to achieve goals or positively contribute to society) contribute to the problematic presentation of psychological health issues in the individual's perception that there is no other way out of a situation. There are psychological health reasons why officers might leave before retirement, given the media claims that officers are leaving with PTSD and choosing the route of workers' compensation to meet economic needs (Associated Press, 2020; Faulkner et al., 2020; Matascastillo, 2020; Nestor, 2024; Sawyer & Hargarten, 2023). GST posits that when individuals cannot meet their perceived needs, they find alternative ways to obtain the resources they believe will help them escape their current situation. GST has been validated in research on police occupational stress (Broidy, 2001; Moon & Jonson, 2012).

The idea that officers may struggle to overcome their psychological health difficulties, particularly in the context of retirement, may be central to why officers leave early. GST provides a framework for describing this problem.

### **Nature of the Study**

The approach for this study is grounded theory (GT; Booth et al., 2016; Buser & James, 2009; Laureate Education, Inc. (Executive Producer), 2010; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Reeves et al., 2013). GT enables themes, concepts, and theories to emerge from narratives in an unbiased manner (Glaser, 2008). GT has been used in studies with law enforcement narratives as the primary framework for the researcher almost exclusively (Armstrong, 2020; B. Castle, 2018; B. J. Castle et al., 2019; Craw, 2022; Henton-Easter et al., 2021; Laura Dawson, 2014; Littlewolf, 2020; Smith-Kea, 2020). GT guided the formation of the interview guide and its questions, the way data were managed, and the reason why a narrative study was the most applicable to examining the individual law enforcement officer's narratives for leaving how they did before retirement after 2020. When officers report decreased community and administrative support, they report feeling the effects of their mental health symptoms more acutely, and turnover intent increases (Alhashmi et al., 2017, 2019; Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Jabeen et al., 2020; Lambert et al., 2017). These elements are also described in GST psychological health studies among law enforcement officers (Swatt et al., 2007).

This qualitative research study used guided interviews with open-ended questions informed by general strain theory perspectives. Questions were created (Appendix A) to illuminate the narratives of police officers who left the police department after May 25, 2020, which marked the onset of multiple events leading to a mass exodus of police

officers across the United States. Contextual analyses of the narratives garnered through interviews with police officers were conducted. The data were then analyzed using GT research methodology in the context of the interviewees' narratives, identifying themes through each phase of contextual analysis (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Classical Glaserian grounded theory (CGGT) is the tradition of GT that I used, as it focuses on removing as much researcher bias as possible through strict procedures and discipline of the interviewer (Glaser, 2014c, 2015, 2016a; Heath & Cowley, 2004; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023).

### **Definitions**

*Civil unrest:* Civil unrest is a term that describes various ways in which violence or disruption may occur, encompassing a spectrum of actions, from mild forms of nonviolent collective action to terrorism (Kalyvas, 2000).

*Law enforcement officer:* In this paper, law enforcement or law enforcement officers refer to sworn police officers, deputies, or state troopers. A police officer represents law enforcement officers who work in cities or municipalities smaller than a county. A deputy refers to the law enforcement officer who works under the leadership of a Sheriff, who is usually an elected county official. A state trooper refers to an agent of the State they serve in and is under the leadership of the state governor. The powers of each officer may be derived from an elected official who usually delegates that responsibility. Cities and municipalities hire a Chief or Public Safety Director, a Governor may appoint a commissioner, and a Sheriff is elected by their constituents. The term workers' compensation claim refers to how a law enforcement officer sues their jurisdiction for compensation to offset injuries incurred while in service. Workers'

compensation is a type of insurance that pays out a financial settlement in the event of an injury.

*Psychological health:* For this study, psychological health refers to a participant's observation and interpretation of their mental, emotional, and social well-being. It encompasses how they feel, think, and behave daily or during an event. This is central to this study as it is the main reason they want to leave the profession (Associated Press, 2020; Matascastillo, 2020; Sawyer & Hargarten, 2023).

*Riot:* Riot or rioting refers to a violent disturbance of the peace by a large group of people. Rioting is one form of civil unrest on that spectrum. The terms "civil unrest" and "riot" may be used interchangeably, but this analysis will focus solely on the riots that began on May 25, 2020.

*Turnover intent (TI):* Refers to law enforcement officers' desire to leave their jobs voluntarily, as is often the case in the law enforcement profession. This concept is closely related to commitment, which refers to the desire to remain in or leave one's department or profession (Matascastillo, 2020; Moon & Johnson, 2012). Although these two terms may be closely related, they are not interchangeable.

### **Assumptions**

This study assumed that officers would be honest about their experiences that led to their mental health reasons for leaving the profession. This assumption is that officers believe that their narratives may not be documented correctly. Given their desire for correctness in what they say, it is assumed that they were forthright in their answers and expect the correctness of their statements to be documented accordingly. The belief that participants were truthful and honest is necessary for the study's validity. Knowing that

this research could lead to positive changes for them and their colleagues, officer-participants wanted their answers to strengthen the researcher's findings, which may mean the participants introduced bias. From the interpretive perspective, this is fundamental to the emerging themes, as I only had participants' interviews from which to derive the data.

Another assumption is that reflexivity, objectivity, and critical data analysis managed researcher bias. CGGT focuses on the investigator's role as an observer rather than a participant. Although I read from a guide and engaged in icebreaking dialogue, the follow-up and probing questions were asked as the situation warranted culling valid data. The three-phased coding process in CGGT also offered different methods to examine the data. Each piece of data were analyzed thoroughly. Memoing or taking detailed notes through journaling helped support the coding process when information arose that the researcher believed needed to be accounted for when interpreting the data.

I also assumed that interpreting the participants' subjective reported experiences yielded rich and meaningful data. The interpretive perspective relied on the participants' lived experience of having chosen to leave their profession before retirement. This information helped identify what is accurate from what has been conjectured. The researcher accurately documented the findings and requested that participants review them (e.g., as part of triangulation) to verify the accuracy of the reported information during their interviews.

### **Scope of Delimitations**

GST posits that if an individual is stressed enough without the potential to advocate for themselves or gain necessary resources, they may turn towards ineffective

behaviors such as crime (Agnew, 1992, 2018; Brezina, 2017; Choi, 2019; Kondrat & Connolly, 2023; C. Li et al., 2023; Song et al., 2020; L. Wang & Jiang, 2023) or problematic drinking (Swatt et al., 2007), thoughts of suicide after exposure to violence among police officers (Bishopp & Boots, 2014), and acute psychological presentations following violence on police (Bishopp et al., 2019; Bishopp & Boots, 2014). With police, some studies have attempted to look at behaviors like corruption (Wang et al., 2022), suicide ideation (Bishopp & Boots, 2014), organizational commitment (Moon & Johnson, 2012), and alcohol consumption (Swatt et al., 2007). Although closely related to the organizational commitment study by Moon and Johnson (2012), officers in that study often transferred to other departments rather than leaving the profession altogether. Transferability may extend to federal law enforcement agencies and potentially other countries that have experienced attrition.

### **Limitations**

Among some of the limitations of conducting a qualitative research study is the sample size. It is often the case that saturation can be achieved with eight to 12 participants (Johansson, 2019; Padgett, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Sutton & Austin, 2015). In this case, saturation occurred at six participants out of the 45 who volunteered for the study. Twenty-three met the inclusion criteria while 20 moved forward, making appointments for an interview. A smaller sample size may not allow for greater transferability if the sample consisted entirely of officers from a single geographic location. All the officers who participated in the study came from one midwestern state. The demographics included rural, urban, male, female, junior officers, sergeants, a few lower-level administrators, and one upper administrator, but no persons of color.

Police officers also work in a high-context and closed culture (Manning & Manning, 1978). It was possible that officers may not have wanted to speak openly about their experiences with an outsider. Good interviewing skills were necessary to comfort the participant while remaining objective. In a few cases, the participants wanted to speak to the interviewer before accepting the interview. In others, they relied on word of mouth from other officers to ensure I was a legitimate person they could confide in.

Finally, there was the issue of potential bias. I have been a law enforcement resource for over a decade. Before then, I trained officers in multiple states on mental health issues and wellness from 2007 until now. Officers confide in me and tell me their viewpoints and perspectives. As a mental health professional since 2010 and a practitioner since 2008, many of my clients have been in law enforcement. I chose CGGT as my framework because it helped the researcher decrease researcher bias. Through strict adherence to its principles, I learned to allow concepts to emerge without interference. The transcripts of the interviews and the format of the interview questionnaire were critical in maintaining a smooth flow from one question to another without influencing the participant.

### **Significance**

Research that uncovers officers' self-reported experiences may provide insights into their psychological reasons and motivations for departure. This study could lead to the development of proactive strategies in recruiting, training, addressing officer culture, and implementing wellness programs. With this information, psychologists, mental health providers, mental health program administrators/leaders in policing, community stakeholders, and government officials may become better equipped to implement more

effective support for the retention of police. Additionally, results from this study could provide relevant data to practitioners to improve their training to work with psychologically injured police officers. Police department leadership may also benefit from the results of this study. Leaders could be better informed when developing training seminars and recruitment or retention activities. Therefore, this could be transformative research toward social change within law enforcement. This study focuses on the impact of a factor that may be the most significant in the current societal environment, which has not been addressed by previous research.

States like Minnesota have passed laws requiring public employees to see a mental health professional for up to 24 sessions before submitting a workers' compensation claim (PERA, 2023). Mental health professionals (MHPs) must now assess, diagnose, and treat individuals, but there is no established case law or research to guide them in optimally addressing the issue of attrition. This study may provide valuable insights that inform the development of future effective interventions. This would impact MHPs and their clients as well as administrators and jurisdictions facing attrition problems.

The significance of this study could also strengthen the use of CGGT with a population that has been studied primarily through quantitative research methods. GST has not been applied to attrition factors as a lens, which, at the visceral level, seems to be a significant factor in departure from law enforcement. The potential to increase our use of GST could translate into how we utilize it for the recruitment and retention of future law enforcement officers, incorporating psychological perspectives that are not yet fully integrated as a resource.

Hearing from officers to better understand their firsthand accounts of why they retired prematurely may help identify psychological strategies to decrease attrition, which, in turn, impacts community costs and possibly the quality of life in the community. If scientific study can enhance the psychological understanding of why police officers leave the career field following civil unrest events, such as those on May 25, 2020, then the potential for positive social change is increased. This study aimed to explore the psychological aspects of the exodus phenomenon among police officers in the United States.

### **Summary**

The problem of police exodus since 2020 continues to effect communities, policymakers, and police leadership across the country. Reports of police shortages and departments shutting down due to retention issues and high turnover are widespread. Most of the research on law enforcement has been quantitative. Researchers agree that more needs to be done in the direction of qualitative studies to tease out the nuances in officers' narratives. No research has described why many officers leave the police force after significant events, such as the May 2020 riots. This study aimed to provide knowledge that could inform the development of effective recruitment, retention, and officer wellness efforts. The process of delineating the research gap is further explored in the following chapter. There, I also introduce the conceptual framework selected for studying this phenomenon.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

There are no first-hand accounts of the reasons why officers are leaving before retirement after the events of May 2020 related to their mental health. The rioting and civil unrest that began in Minneapolis, MN, in May of 2020 sparked an exodus of police officers claiming post-traumatic stress disorder as the injury leading to their exit from law enforcement (Associated Press, 2020). According to the League of Minnesota Cities (2022), 87% of officers from the cities they represent, which does not include Minneapolis, cited mental health injury for their workers' compensation claims. This study aimed to explore the firsthand experiences of police officers who left the field before their retirement and after May 25, 2020. Between the years 2020 and 2024, the law enforcement profession struggled with significant losses, with fewer officers completing their careers, citing PTSD and related mental health problems as the reason. Still, the reasons for leaving the profession are documented primarily through anecdotal evidence in open-source articles. The research is also clear that first-hand officer narratives are missing. Research on this profession is heavily quantitative. The number of officers exiting law enforcement continues to exceed the number of potential recruits (PERF, 2023). Police academy enrollment and recruitment of qualified candidates have decreased (PERF, 2023). This study aimed to answer what police officers report as their reasons for leaving the police force before retirement.

The lack of protection does not necessarily result in crime reduction but rather that the responsibility falls to the next level of jurisdiction, thereby placing a strain on other levels of law enforcement (Boylan, 2022). The psychological effects of the process officers go through and the financial price many communities pay out of their insurance

offers to psychologically injured officers (Kyron et al., 2021). Areas like Minneapolis, Atlanta, Buffalo, Seattle, and the Miami metropolitan area reported early in 2020 that the riots in reaction to the death of George Floyd led to net losses of police officers over 6 months. The Council on Crime and Justice (2022) reported that reductions in the size of the police force are another contributor to communities suffering because of unchallenged crimes.

The gap in the literature is the the scarcity of police officer narratives. Specifically, this study explored the motivations of officers leaving the police force before retirement and since May 25, 2020. Aside from Adams's (2019) qualitative study on the Ferguson Effect, there are no firsthand accounts of officers who left police work before the expected retirement in their jurisdiction. The literature remains mostly quantitative, focusing on job stress.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

#### **Library Databases and Search Engines**

The databases and search engines used to cull literature relevant to this study's problem and purpose were Google and Google Scholar. I used SAGE, ProQuest One Academic, Thoreau, APA PsychARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycINFO, and PSYCEXTRA for academic and peer-reviewed content. Outside of scholarly databases, I searched industry-specific databases, including the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Criminal Justice Database, Criminological Research, and the DOJ. Related to the mental or medical health issue that I felt could introduce more content, I searched through databases such as Disability Statistics, EBSCO, PTSDPubs, PubMed, and the World Health Organization.

My strategy was designed to determine if there was a broad connection to this research topic by examining citations in articles. The search included general searches in the Walden University library. Finally, I searched for potential dissertations on the topic or related to it that could yield additional sources and databases. These were searched for through Dissertations and Theses@Walden.

To identify the relevant research on the topic of police officer psychological distress following civil unrest and police officer retirement turnover before retirement, search terms and keywords related to the topic were *psychological health of police officers, workers' compensation claims in law enforcement, officer stress, officer retention, law enforcement and psychological health, reasons officers leave law enforcement, police officer opinion or narratives on workstress, police officer retirement, police officer perspectives, critical incident, and law enforcement workers' compensation*. The keywords used were *law enforcement, police officer, deputy, stress, psychological, mental health, injury, strain, narrative, opinion, resilience, retention, retirement, medical, post-traumatic stress, riot, unrest, support, critical, and incident*.

With the understanding that the iterative process and the use of GT enabled a deeper analysis of narrative data, yielding a better understanding of police officer motivations for electing premature retirement. I reviewed databases related to law enforcement and criminal justice statistics, with a specific focus on key terms relevant to law enforcement. What often came up was the concept of strain and stress of the profession and how to create resilience in the occupations related to law enforcement. The databases for this portion of the search included the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Criminal Justice Database, Criminological Research, and DOAJ. I reviewed police

journals, including the International Association of Chiefs of Police, to determine if there were any other potential databases where scholarly research existed. The key terms and keywords used were used throughout all the searches of the databases as listed in the section before this one.

The New York Times article that sparked initial interest in the topic described disability claims skyrocketing after May 2020 (Associated Press, 2020) because of potential mental health problems. This led to examining the same terms in other databases that included psychological information. Databases searched included SAGE, ProQuest One Academic, Thoreau, APA PsychARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycINFO, and PSYCEXTRA.

The final database search included looking for other dissertations related to the topic. I observed that the content of other research articles did not specifically address the mental health narratives of law enforcement officers leaving the profession. I reviewed dissertations to determine if new thinking has emerged regarding the impact of psychological health on police turnover. I was searching to see if there were other, more recent examples of interest in mental health variables among law enforcement professionals.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **General Strain Theory**

As stated in Chapter 1, GST offers a perspective on why individuals who perceive a lack of resources may engage in criminal or ineffective behavior. Traditionally, GST has been used in criminology to explain criminal behavior. Over time, GST has focused more on psychological and emotional antecedents to other behaviors. One of the subsets

of GST focuses on occupational strain and job commitment (Moon & Johnson, 2012), which is key to this study. GST has been used to study suicidal ideation and patterns amongst youth already in psychological health treatment (Cullen et al., 2022), academic stress among students in college (Li et al., 2023), measures of victimization amongst victims of crime (Barbieri et al., 2019), LatinX culture (Scott et al., 2023), depression amongst school-based LGBTQ students (Morgan et al., 2023), and many others. The scope has been on the psychological perspectives of all these populations, which is ideal for understanding the psychological underpinnings of police officers' departures from May 2020 to the present.

### ***GST and Law Enforcement***

GST in law enforcement research has focused on criminal behaviors among police officers, such as corruption (Wang et al., 2033), and officer use of force (Fryer, 2019; Morabito et al., 2017; Rossler & Terrill, 2017). GST has expanded into studies on dangerous alcohol consumption amongst law enforcement officers correlated with their trauma experiences (Ménard & Arter, 2013; Swatt et al., 2007; Yun & Lee, 2015). More recently, GST has been used to examine psychological reasons why minority police officers and women would remain in law enforcement (Suboch et al., 2017). Related to commitment to the profession, GST has also been used to explore commitment to one's department from social and psychological perspectives (Moon & Johnson, 2012). GST has also been used to research the problem of death by suicide among police officers (Bishopp & Boots, 2014). GST has been generalized to other areas of study and other groups. For this study, it seemed reasonable that GST is an appropriate lens through

which to examine the psychological perspectives of law enforcement officers who left the profession for whatever reason after May 2020, due to the strains of the profession.

### **Grounded Theory**

The two most compared and used qualitative research frameworks are the phenomenological approach (PA) and GT (Al-Eisawi, 2022a; Jamali, 2018; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023; Urcia, 2021). PA focuses on attempting to understand a phenomenon's dimensions based on the lived experiences of individuals through contextualizing the "inner essence and structure" of said experience (Burns & Peacock, 2019; Munhall, 2012; Urcia, 2021; VanManen, 2017). GT is a design that takes subjective data and then, through the iterative process, identifies a theory (Al-Eisawi, 2022b; Carlin & Kim, 2019a; Chun Tie et al., 2019; Glaser, 2016; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Johansson, 2019; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023; Urcia, 2021; Urquhart, 2013). This research used GT to contextually gather data and use the iterative process offered through GT to identify the theory.

### ***Origins of Grounded Theory***

Within GT, there are three perspectives for how to perceive data, which the originators break down: Glaserian GT and Straussian GT (Carlin & Kim, 2019a; Johansson, 2019; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023) and a newcomer to GT theory, Charmaz (Charmaz, 2003; Rieger, 2019). Glaser is the most prominent figure within GT and is known as the founder of the framework (Carlin & Kim, 2019a; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023; Rieger, 2019; Urcia, 2021). In 1965, Glaser set out to provide a rigorous, methodological research process for qualitative research. Glaser initially began as a quantitative researcher and found that qualitative research was

necessary but lacked a framework (Rieger, 2019). In 1967, with the help of Strauss, a considered interactionist expert, Glaser formulated the positivist framework for analyzing qualitative data, known as GT (Glaser, 1964, 1965, 1978, 2016a; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rieger, 2019). Glaserian GT is inductive and allows theories to emerge from the data without the researcher interacting with the data to reinforce their own bias (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 1971, 2017; Rieger, 2019). Glaser and Strauss started with topics that would yield data primarily in the medical field, where GT is still widely used. To achieve this, they researched the perspectives of dying individuals and began to realize that their framework maintained its validity and integrity (Glaser, 1968; Glaser & Strauss, 1965, 1971). To determine if the framework was valid in other areas, he applied GT to marketing and other business endeavors, where, once again, GT proved to be very revealing of themes related to the process of theory development (Rieger, 2019).

### ***Differences Between Approaches***

Glaser and Strauss eventually disagreed due to philosophical perspectives on the role of the researcher. Whereas Glaser was objectivist and positivistic in their perspective, Strauss was more relativistic in their approach and used more of a constructivist methodology toward data collection (Al-Eisawi, 2022b; Byrne, 2001; Carlin & Kim, 2019a, 2019b; Heath & Cowley, 2004; Johansson, 2019; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023; Rieger, 2019; Urcia, 2021; Urquhart, 2013). Glaser publicly argued that Strauss, along with their new associate, Corbin, had drifted from GT and should not refer to what they do as GT (Glaser, 1992, 1998, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Rieger, 2019). Glaser's public attacks and relentless writing on what is and is not GT did not stop Strauss and Corbin from continuing their approach

(Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin's data collection and analysis approach was based on pragmatism and symbolic interaction, asserting that reality is not objective but subjective to how society views or interprets interactions. Strauss died in the 1990s, and Corbin continued the work they had started. However, more recently, they denounced a relativist epistemological approach and were cited as saying that they are still constructivist in response to Glaserian GT researchers' criticisms of Strauss and Corbin (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023).

Charmaz was a student of their mentors, Glaser and Strauss, and took a middle path to the ideas of their mentors by creating what they called constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2023). This framework returned to classical Glaserian GT but formally changed the perspective from positivist to constructivist (Charmaz, 2003, 2006; Rieger, 2019), which only infuriated Glaser more and helped motivate Glaser's ceaseless assault on approaches that were not based on the original GT. In this approach, Charmaz acknowledges a subjective reality formulated by the interactions between the researcher and the subject, placing Charmaz on the far end of the positivist-constructivist approaches of their mentor.

### ***GT and Law Enforcement***

GT is indicated as a valuable approach to qualitative psychological research (Thornberg et al., 2023). GT helps examine individuals, social psychological paradigms, organizational processes, social processes, interactions between individuals and organizations, and society, as well as "participants' actions, interpretations, and understandings" (Thornberg et al., 2023, p. 45). When reviewing research regarding law enforcement, GT was used in studies related to police work. Researchers have studied the

narratives of top women administrators in police work (Smith-Kea, 2020), the observations and attitudes of children towards school resource officers (Layton & Gerstenblatt, 2022), the motivations of police officers who respond to domestic abuse situations (Ash, 2023), how female police officers cope after incidences (Henton-Easter, et al., 2021), how police officers might use grounded theory to study jihadist networks (De Bie & De Poot, 2016), how officers respond to deaf people (Garner, 2018), and many other topics in criminology (Escalante & Escalante Gomez, 2011). The most relevant studies to this research are how officers have responded to disciplinary action (Castle, 2018), stress (Henton-Easter et al., 2021), and defunding of police (Adams, 2019).

### ***The Selected Approach***

Because of the amount of narrative that I have already been exposed to through my practice as a psychotherapist working primarily with first responders and veterans, there are biases of which I am aware and unaware. I lean towards relativistic and empirical epistemological views, which Strauss and Charmaz also tend to do. However, Glaser's arguments are compelling and have gone unchallenged among researchers in qualitative studies. The Glaserian GT approach is still widely used in qualitative research. In response to the potential for bias in data collection and coding, I used classical Glaserian GT to strengthen the data analysis.

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

The following paragraphs provide a contextual overview of the research on police work, with subsections focusing on research relating specifically to the proposed research. Research on issues related to law enforcement officers and the profession of policing dates to the London Metropolitan Police (the "Met"), established in 1829, which

is considered the world's first and oldest professional police force. The original study and subsequent studies have primarily focused on the effects of policing and police tactics on reducing crime (Bindler & Hjalmarsson, 2021).

There are hundreds of articles, studies, and dissertations on various aspects of policing throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the earlier articles focused on attitudes toward labor relations (Schwochau, 1986; Wenninger, 1966), the size of police forces (Walzer, 1970), and the supervision of police forces (Chen, 1955; Schwochau, 1986; Tiffany, 1970). These researchers were primarily from economics, sociology, and labor relations, and their studies were all quantitative. Through the 1960s, more than likely because of the social revolution taking place during those times, research began to focus on attitudes toward police officers and the profession's need for reform, specifically on the topic of police brutality and use of force (Ford, 1973; Harris, 1967; Schnepf, 1966; Snow, 2006). Around the 1980s, the topic of police stress was formally introduced, and the field of psychology started engaging with the phenomenon albeit through primarily quantitative study (Cheung & Li, 2023; Conroy, 1987; Elliott et al., 1994; Johnson, 1993; Lowenstein, 1984; Queirós et al., 2020b; Reiser, 1972, 1973, 1982; Richmond et al., 1999; Schwochau, 1986; Walker, 1985). Around the 1990s, researchers continued with their interest in officer stress but also added studies on the perceptions of officers towards victims of crimes and how it impacted their decisions (Flood, 2003; George, 1998; Hirschel & Hutchison, 1992; Lonsway, 1996; Sherman & Cohn, 1989; Vrij et al., 2001; Walker, 1985). Of interest through the 1990s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the way that the occupation of police work was impacting problem behaviors in marriage, drinking, and police suicide (Elliott et al., 1994; Larned, 2010; Ménard & Arter, 2013; Richmond

et al., 1999; Swatt et al., 2007; Zhao et al., 2003). Very few studies in the 1990s examined potential interventions for psychological or physical health issues related to the profession. The amount of research on police stress motivated the need for intervention research (Chen & Wu, 2022; Craw, 2022; Demling & Desanti, 2000; DOJ, 2023; Gersons et al., 2000; Jones, 2021; Queirós et al., 2020b; Rentmeesters & Hermans, 2023; Varker et al., 2022). Still, the majority of the research is focused on how officers engage the community and how their training impacts their decision-making in domestic abuse, sexual abuse, mental health, minority groups, etc., outcomes (Armstrong, 2020; Ash, 2023; Bindler & Hjalmarsson, 2021; Bratina et al., 2020; Comartin et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2023; Engel et al., 2022; Lai & Lisnek, 2023; Layton & Gerstenblatt, 2022; Pryce & Time, 2023).

### **Debates and Disagreements on Why Officers Are Leaving the Profession Early**

The mass exodus that took place in 2020 after May 25, 2020, in the United States spurred an enormous number of workers' compensation claims for post-traumatic stress disorder and several physical health claims (Associated Press, 2020; Maxouris, 2021; New, 2001). During a meeting with the League of Minnesota Cities, I was informed that the reason officers are leaving is that "they are just pissed off" and "Minnesota makes it too easy for them to leave and get paid to do it" (League of Minnesota Cities, 2022). What they were citing is the Public Employees Retirement Association (PERA) initiatives that state that post-traumatic stress disorder is presumably an outcome of police work and allowed the officers to use the workers' compensation claims process to sue their cities or the League of Minnesota Cities for the injury while drawing early from their pension (PERA, 2021). Due to the impact of PERA initiatives and benefits on the

City of Minneapolis and the League of Minnesota Cities, primarily, the new PERA initiatives were revised in 2023 to disallow a workers' compensation claim for mental health issues without first receiving mental health treatment for the condition (PERA, 2023).

There are several disagreements with the new law. Researchers have already established through quantitative studies that occupational stress (Duran et al., 2020; Elliott et al., 1994; Kim et al., 2016; Moon & Jonson, 2012; Zhao et al., 2003), psychological contract violation with administrators (Birch et al., 2017; Duran et al., 2020; Moon & Jonson, 2012), and community perspectives on law enforcement (Akins et al., 2016; Burkhardt et al., 2017; Tyuse et al., 2017) impact turnover. The difficulty with the stance that officers are leaving because they are angry with administrations, their communities, and the job for the sake of an early pension goes against research that depicts the workers' compensation process as very pejorative towards the individual and difficult to get through (Kyron, 2021). When an officer submits a claim for medical/mental health compensation through the workers' compensation process, the outcome is usually a sizeable settlement. During this process, they also begin to get an early pension, but to do so, the officer must undergo significant independent medical or psychological health examinations requested by the officer's attorneys, the City's attorneys, and potentially by the court. They are also required to provide a deposition where they are questioned about their traumatic events or their physical injuries. The process was more straightforward and less pejorative before the exodus, so the argument that officers are angry and want their money early has developed.

Officers are also leaving departments where they traditionally report higher levels of support and satisfaction and are not angry about how administrators treated them, which further challenges the notion that officers leave because they are angry (Maxouris, 2021). The other problem with the argument that officers leave only because they are angry and want settlements for workers' compensation is that not every state has programs like those in Minnesota. Chicago, Illinois, which also lost hundreds of officers, incurred significant financial losses, like cities in Minnesota, due to workers' compensation claims. However, the City of Buffalo, New York, does not have programs or policies like those cited in Minnesota when examining its state laws regarding workers' compensation. They also lost hundreds of officers. Florida and Atlanta both lost hundreds of officers. Atlanta describes the financial loss they had due to workers' compensation, but Florida did not describe the economic loss (Adams et al., 2023). The argument that officers are leaving vindictively does not appear accurate, suggesting the potential for meaningful qualitative research that gives voice to officers themselves.

### **Critical and Related Issues in Meta-Analysis**

Several meta-analyses helped to research a gap in the literature. Violanti et al. (2014) provided a literature review analyzing stress and resiliency research, as well as the impact of police absence. Violanti is a well-respected researcher of law enforcement issues, including police suicide, which he pioneered in research (Violanti, 2004; Violanti et al., 2019). The authors reviewed empirical research on the topics of police officer resilience, psychological health, PTSD, traumatic events, and officer work schedules. The review introduced the occurrence of death by suicide of police officers following traumatic events, which served as a motivator to support this study for the simple

potential of saving lives. The review was free of bias and included quantitative descriptive studies focusing on police officer stress. There were hundreds of references for this document and additional articles to review, reinforcing the need for qualitative research. The article introduced a problem within quantitative police research where some studies found lower rates of suicide among officers. In contrast, others saw an increased rate of suicide (Violanti et al., 2019), which helped me understand how studies might not lend themselves to officers' actual beliefs about their conditions at work, individually and organizationally; these are elements of my research that came up.

In keeping with the themes around mental health, turnover, and suicide among law enforcement officers, Stanley et al. (2016) reviewed 63 quantitative studies reviewing thoughts of first responders and how they lead to behaviors like self-medication through alcohol abuse and other problematic behaviors that increase the potential of dying by suicide (Stanley et al., 2016). What the authors also pointed out was the weaknesses in the studies towards discussing the potential of death by suicide in significantly vulnerable groups of first responders. The study revealed a need for more robust research with significantly more extended periods for data gathering, such as a longitudinal study could provide. Although this article did not reveal the need for quantitative research, it did state that better research on the attitudes of first responders is necessary and currently missing in the literature, which further encouraged me.

Another literature review for this study came from the United Arab Emirates. Alhashmi et al. (2017) used a conceptual framework to look at the antecedents of employee turnover intentions (TI) in the police force in the United Arab Emirates. The article's authors set out to conduct a large-scale literature review, but not quite a meta-

analysis, of research related to police turnover. The hope was to increase retention, particularly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with hopes to generalize their findings to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and other police organizations undergoing significant policy reform (Alhashmi et al., 2017). Their focus was on the psychological health of officers. The writers suggest that the findings from their analysis of the literature they reviewed helped the authors develop a conceptual framework for reducing turnover, which could hopefully be generalized to other public sector organizations. The writers stated that their literature review helps mental health practitioners understand the framework that UAE police officers operate within. The authors filtered their literature research through the leader-member exchange (LMX), developed and researched in Western settings. No bias was detected, which encouraged me to review other works from the principal investigator, including police officer turnover. The authors described how leaders in administration communicate or interact with officers, the psychological stress of the employees, and how officers perceive the support they receive from administrators.

A literature review conducted by Kane et al. (2018) focused on the second most widely researched area in policing: how officers engage with people in mental health crises and whether specific interventions, such as Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT), are effective. I used this literature review primarily to find other researchers who may have researched attrition of officers and qualitative studies with officers in general. The authors concluded that there are no well-organized randomized clinical trials, suggesting they only looked at quantitative studies. They made a massive leap to suggest that policymakers looking to invest in CIT training for their officers should consider that

before deciding (Kane et al., 2018). This is not a point to argue, but more so to emphasize that it was not in the author's original description for the literature review and was very biased in their approach to article review. This article helped me with the importance of clearly describing potential biases and controls for said biases. In large part, this article helped me identify why the classical Glaserian grounded theory approach is necessary to ensure that my research removes potential barriers to academic/scholarly review.

Sherwood et al. (2019) included 20 peer-reviewed research articles on the prevalence of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and burnout in police officers because of risk factors associated with the profession. The authors reviewed articles published between 2008 and 2018. The researchers found that *“high levels of neuroticism, low social support, and engaging in passive or avoidant coping strategies were correlated with poor psychological health, with low social support being the top contributor to potential psychological health issues.”* (Sherwood et al., 2019). This article provides additional information on what is currently known about police work. The review found that individual, organizational, and occupational factors lead to the development of psychological health problems. Of equal importance in addressing the research gap, the authors provided information in their review of the articles that met the inclusion criteria, some of which have been cited in this literature review. This literature review also highlighted the prevalence of quantitative research focusing on narrow topics in the study of law enforcement issues. This increased my enthusiasm towards the gap that I eventually found.

A systematic review of the literature regarding interventions for PTSD, anxiety, sleepiness, and fatigue in law enforcement conducted by Lees et al. (2019) started with a

cursory analysis of over 300 research articles that eventually dwindled to 43. The researchers sought to identify effective interventions for these problem areas and provide recommendations based on empirical support. They found that targeting work-related stress was the most studied intervention that worked to reduce PTSD, anxiety, sleepiness, and fatigue. Once again, no qualitative research was cited, and the reviewers suggested that more randomized clinical trials are needed to strengthen the recommendations about workplace interventions and the psychological aspects of law enforcement. They mentioned that workplace stress and the psychological distress of the job of law enforcement officers are essential areas of study, as it is assumed that they are antecedents to officer attrition before retirement (Lees et al., 2019).

Queiros et al. (2019) cited elements that lead to police officer stress, burnout, the experience of mental health disorders, and potentially even death by suicide in their review of research articles from 24 different countries. The focus of the literature review was to determine whether the surveys used in all these countries were adequate for gathering data, suggesting the potential of the experience in the areas most studied in law enforcement. Once again, only quantitative tools were reviewed, and no qualitative studies were mentioned. The writers concluded that more research to address officer mental health needs to be conducted to prevent mental health disorders that could potentially lead to death by suicide (Queirós et al., 2020b), which is itself a form of attrition before retirement, but not precisely focused on the officer's narrative. This would add value to the qualitative studies that describe a broken record: law enforcement officers experience stress and burnout.

Violanti and their associates are among the most prolific researchers and writers on law enforcement stress, but more recently, suicide (Violanti, 2004; Violanti et al., 2014, 2019). Violanti et al. (2019) reviewed 97 documents, resulting in a final analysis of 43 articles from 1997 to 2016 that attempted to identify gaps in the literature regarding predictors of law enforcement officer suicide. They mention in their article that the hope is to find meaningful approaches to law enforcement officer death by suicide and promote research on the topic. They note that death by suicide seems to increase as officers leave the profession. However, they state that reports of death by suicide vary based on policies and the method of death by suicide (i.e., drinking to death versus suicide by gun) (Violanti et al., 2019). The data remained quantitatively driven and appeared to adopt a secondary research approach. Given that Violanti and their associates are among the most cited and respected researchers, this review increased my enthusiasm for a narrative approach to research from the officer's lips in their own words, which could yield a whole field of research into retention and wellness.

In a closely related literature review, Cheung & Li (2023) mention that a rise in anti-police demonstrations, rioting, the demands of the job, and the danger of the job are contributors to increasing police stress. These researchers reviewed 30 more recent studies from 12 locations involving over 35,000 participants. The researchers cited 20 other literature reviews and described the cross-sectional methodology used to select articles that focused on police officer stress through an organizational and operational theoretical lens (Cheung & Li, 2023). The researchers described the review approach that led them from over 2,000 articles to the articles that directly informed their review focus. The approach to the literature review was well-defined and detailed, enabling me to

decide what to include and exclude based on the provided parameters. However, it focused on job-related stress and predictors, a widely researched topic in law enforcement. The document described differences in officers' positions (i.e., investigations versus street-level positions) and identified which officers are more likely to experience burnout more quickly, including which countries have higher burnout rates. No articles included officers from the United States or countries outside Asia and Europe. The authors suggested research that focuses more on causal relationships between burnout and job-related stress, as well as on non-male-dominant samples. The researchers did not explicitly mention that qualitative research is appropriate; however, it should be noted that they did not cite any qualitative research in their articles.

## **TI**

The issue of police turnover, relevant to this study, has also been researched using primarily quantitative methods, with a narrow focus on specific populations. One study examined turnover among police chiefs in Texas (Li & Brown, 2019) using peer-evaluation survey data. Other researchers studied potential causes for why officers would leave or consider leaving (Alhashmi et al., 2017; Jabeen et al., 2020; Kulachai & Amaraphibal, 2017; Lambert et al., 2017). Some researchers sought answers through quantitative investigations of officers' experiences with administrative entities and governing bodies (Boylan, 2022; Duran et al., 2020; Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Kyron et al., 2021; Maxouris, 2021). Police research is abundant, and there is global interest in this profession and its impact on communities.

Kulachai & Amaraphibal (2017) developed a causal model research study directly related to police turnover, primarily in the eastern region of Thailand. This article

examined the relationship between job motivation, job stress, job burnout, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction on turnover intention (TI) of (N=682) police officers in Thailand through a survey questionnaire. This was, again, a quantitative study that supported that job stress and feeling unsupported led to job burnout and eventual psychological distress, increasing the likelihood of TI. These writers found some inconsistencies between their findings and those of other researchers who claim job satisfaction is a protective factor towards TI in that they found the correlation insignificant. The researchers report that this could be because, in Thailand, the policing profession is very stable and sought after. This article helped identify a potential list of questions to garner perceptions officers may have as themes emerge, informing me of the development of the questions I initially developed. The writers recommend creating sound policies to provide a supportive work environment (Kulachai & Amaraphibal, 2017). However, that sentiment seemed to be an afterthought and felt loosely connected to the research they conducted.

Brunetto et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study examining the correlation between management support and police officers working through what the authors referred to as “red tape and stress.” The authors sought to determine whether management support was sufficient or if officers required the use of their psychological capital (PsyCap) to resolve the issue. Other areas that the researchers examined were discretionary power, affective commitment, and TI. They surveyed (N=588) officers engaged with the public across the United States. This article features a substantial sample size and directly addresses how police administrations across the US may impact officers’ turnover rates. The writers confess that using a self-report survey tool may

support respondent biases, but generally, their accounting methods were relevant and appropriate (Brunetto et al., 2017). These authors refer to Lamber et al. (2017) and Kulachai and Amaraphibal (2017) and describe leader-member exchange (LMX), perceived organizational support (POS), and turnover intent (TI) as relevant in the study of police officers. Given that my research examines the psychological changes in police officers and anticipates that comments about administration may arise, it was appropriate to include them here, as they describe the phenomenon and support further research, including qualitative studies. The mention of psychological capital being a key feature of police officers who responded that their LMXs do not impact their TI was interesting, given the undertones in Minneapolis reporting that administrator decisions do have a role in their decision to leave (Seidl, 2024).

Violanti et al. (2017), including some researchers from the work presented in the previous paragraph, published further research through the Health and Human Services, citing 98 references. In this article, the researchers employed quantitative analysis to examine the correlation between officer stress and absences from work. The researchers briefly referred to TI through the workers' compensation claims process, which is where some of my recruitment took place. The authors found that exposure to high-stress incidents and social exchange with community members were correlated with TI due to medical and psychological factors and stated that more psychological studies need to take place to reduce TI. This is very relevant to my research. [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Meier et al. (2018) studied the attrition of police officers as predicted by peer evaluations during academy training. These researchers examined whether there are methods for early detection of individuals who may fail in the police field through peer

evaluations. Police academy recruits (N=1248) ranked the top three and bottom three trainees on peer evaluations during a 24-week academy. The findings showed that those identified by their peers as needing more work left the police field. The authors stated that peer evaluations strongly predicted officer success in the police profession. Although interesting and relevant to TI, this quantitative study focused solely on the year following academy training within their assigned agencies.

Li et al. (2019) examined a subgroup of the profession to determine the causes of police chief turnover. The study examined the impact that two forms of performance, leadership and departmental performance, had on the longevity of a police chief in Texas. The researchers conducted secondary research by reviewing data from two data storage agencies, which yielded a substantial sample size of 164 data sets. Data indicated that time in office and whether a mayor hired the chief or not were two indicators of TI (Li & Brown, 2019). The researchers also suggested that the police chief's evaluator's perceived poor performance was directly correlated to TI but no data from communities, peers, or subordinates was available to inform regarding actual performance. Although police chiefs are not the focus of the proposed study, more senior officers may certainly be interviewed, and questions about their beliefs regarding whether they are doing a "good job" or not seem relevant.

Emeriau-Farges et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative study examining the correlation between the officer's psychological health at work (PHW) and emotional self-efficacy (ESE). A survey was conducted on (N=990) officers using a questionnaire focused on the officers' self-perception of ESE. However, the writers suggested that ESE and PHW are factors in officer TI (Emeriau-Farges et al., 2019). They did not specifically

examine how psychological health is impacted by workplace stress and lightly cite some research suggesting a correlation. The authors were not attempting to establish this connection. However, this article was very influential in guiding the development of my proposed research problem, citing turnover within the force and factors of psychological and emotional health.

Jabeen et al. (2020) conducted a study in the United Arab Emirates that explored antecedents to police officer TI. Jabeen is another well-regarded researcher on police officer stress and TI but focuses most of their research on emerging Middle Eastern police forces. In this study, (N=176) officers were given survey questionnaires. The writers found that perceived organizational support (POS) does not impact TI, but that work-family conflict and autonomy do. The more conflict and the less autonomy the officers experienced, the more significant the predictor for TI (Jabeen et al., 2020). The writers reported that these factors cause psychological distress, which begins to manifest into TI. The focus was on work-family conflict and its impact on TI. This lens helped inform some of my questions to participants, as the current operational environment for police officers may reveal family dynamics that could emerge in the data as part of the officer's psychological stress. This article also identified the need for qualitative analysis of perceptions of police officer TI. Alhashmi, one of the researchers in this group, conducted previous work in this area, which is presented in the next section of this chapter.

### **General Strain Theory**

Moon and Jonson (2012) viewed the problem of law enforcement officers' commitment to their agency as being based on the ability of officers to achieve the

desired outcome in their work as positive stimuli and rewards. They also examined how officers viewed the lack of positive stimuli as unfavorable. The researchers concluded that officers are less likely to remain committed if they cannot achieve the desired outcome in their work. The lack of sufficient positive stimuli in the workplace can harm morale (Moon & Jonson, 2012). General strain theory was the theoretical framework that informed my decision to use GST as a theoretical framework for this dissertation.

Moreover, this study concluded that positive stimuli was directly correlated to organizational commitment, which was used in developing questions for my study. The researchers stated that GST is appropriate for studying law enforcement occupational commitment. The writers provide a detailed history of studies from the 1970s on general commitment to employers and reference studies involving combat veterans as a potential population with similar experiences. The authors found that the greater the strain of the stimulus, the greater the likelihood that the individual will leave their agency or employer. The research was conducted in accordance with a state university's IRB and appears to be reliable. The authors provide a significant and recent list of potential additional sources that I investigated during the formulation of my proposal.

Alhashmi et al. (2019) were referenced in the previous section as a primary contributor to Jabeen's work and, in fact, often co-authored similar research papers. The writers in this article conducted a quantitative analysis of the relationship between leader-member exchange (LMX), perceived organizational support (POS), and turnover intention (TI) of (N=800) UAE police officers. The officers were surveyed through a questionnaire. The filters through which the researchers conducted the research were general strain theory and organizational theory. The researchers found that LMX did not

significantly impact TI, but it did impact POS. The writers wrote unbiasedly and presented more literature from Western policing that directly impacted my proposed research. Moreover, this article confirms that general strain theory is an appropriate framework for examining the problem statement of this dissertation.

### **Grounded Theory and Law Enforcement Officer Narratives**

GT is used almost exclusively when gathering narrative data from police officers. This section reviews grounded theory studies that informed my decision to use classical Glaserian GT. I began by laying the foundation for using grounded theory with law enforcement and transitioned into psychological health studies that are quantitative but key to my research and qualitative, where the use of grounded theory to ascertain law enforcement narratives provided historical support for using GT with this population.

Escalante and Escalante Gomez (2011) researched whether using GT as an inductive process in qualitative research was influential in research related to forensic populations, meaning any element or group related to criminological work. Their findings suggested that grounded theory is well suited for research in the field of criminological psychological research. The writer introduced theories that work well with GT and described epistemological strengths and barriers to using GT. Among some of the obstacles was the interviewer/investigator/researcher as an influencing agent on the subject (Escalante & Escalante Gomez, 2011). This article informed my decision to choose classical Glaserian grounded theory (CGGT) over a more relativistic approach. Due to my interactions with law enforcement officers in Minnesota and other states, I sought to distance myself from the influence I might have on the officers I interviewed.

Closer to my research topic, Castle (2018) employed grounded theory to capture the perceptions of officers undergoing disciplinary processes within their departments. This dissertation provided an in-depth description of the methods used to conduct qualitative research interviews with officers. It referred to the lack of research on officers' narratives in different situations (Castle, 2018). Leaving a department before retirement is difficult, especially when a psychological injury has occurred, for which workers' compensation may be sought. Therefore, officers have stated that it is worse than going through an internal affairs review or testifying in a deposition for a complaint. It seemed appropriate to include this dissertation in this literature review, given that it is one of the few documents where police narratives were captured and grounded theory was used to guide the coding and documenting of the potential of theories for further investigation.

Castle et al. (2019) continued research using grounded theory with law enforcement officers. The researchers sought officers' perspectives and perceptions of ineffective civilian oversight in this article. They interviewed (N=10) officers from multiple jurisdictions in the United States. The article's title and abstract discussed grounded theory, but the study focused on the context and themes that developed during the research without much explanation. Castle et al. (2019) have previously employed grounded theory in their research and validated it with officers. This article does not delve into the specifics of the type of GT approach used. They stated that they used expert-sampling recruiting strategies, which helped them reach saturation. In this document, which appears to be a summary of a larger work that delves into more depth, the authors describe all the study elements using the narrative experiences of officers that

inform this study (Castle et al., 2019). Castle et al. (2019) reported that using these techniques can add to the body of research on law enforcement officers and that more qualitative research is needed. They claim that their approach can offer a meaningful insider's perspective on transforming ineffective systems and enhancing the effectiveness of social changes.

Adams (2019) sought to get the attitudes of rural police officers regarding the Ferguson Effect, which labels the defunding of police in the United States cities since the Ferguson riots. The researchers used the theoretical framework of organizational justice theory to interpret their data. The author suggests that their findings bring information forward to combat the de-policing of police departments while increasing the need for Town Hall meetings with the community. The author notes that the sample size of nine participants from two rural agencies does not render the study generalizable, although generalizability is not a primary goal of qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Additionally, this study does not represent the experiences of larger cities or suburban areas. This article was one of the few that effectively captured the narrative perceptions and perspectives of law enforcement officers. The researcher employed appropriate interviewing methods; however, the study did not provide much insight into my topic. There appears to be a bias toward policing in general. The references are noteworthy, and some of these I followed up.

Smith-Kea (2020) presented a grounded theory dissertation examining the narratives of women who have reached the highest ranks in law enforcement agencies. The researcher commented on the differences between how males and females understand their roles in policing and challenged future researchers to somehow account

for these differences (Smith-Kea, 2020). There was a significant difference in the way female officers and male officers understood their roles in policing. This was their second article on women police officers and their narratives, and in both, the need for considering gender differences is significantly developed. This article informs me of the need to account for population variables, such as gender, although the experience of leaving the police force may not differ between genders. Nevertheless, using grounded theory to gather officers' narratives is demonstrated well and helped to direct my research.

Henton-Easter (2021) produced a dissertation that, like Smith-Kea (2020), approached the way women police officers managed the stress of law enforcement as a profession. They noted significant differences from their male counterparts. Within the document, Henton-Easter cites Smith-Kea (2020) and Beagley (2018) in their research, as both have also investigated the narratives of female police officers. This study uses Strauss and Corbin's GT approach. Here, the writer also points out that nearly all the studies approach police work using a quantitative approach and further states that more qualitative analysis of policing needs to be conducted on the different experiences of law enforcement officers (Henton-Easter et al., 2021).

Ash (2023) used CGGT to study the narratives of police officers in England when approaching domestic abuse cases. In this study, the researcher gathered the perspectives of officers and how they change their behavior towards domestic violence based on their desired perceptions by people in the community and their partners. They found that at the core of their behavior is their need to be perceived in a certain way by others (Ash, 2023). Although the topic is not directly related to this dissertation, CGGT is effectively

demonstrated. The article was very informative on how CGGT must be used to the highest fidelity using strict coding principles, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) laid. This article informs my research that the behavior of leaving law enforcement as a profession can be best studied using a CGGT approach.

### **Psychological Health Studies**

Beagley et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative study that described the experiences of women officers directly involved with the Ferguson riots of 2014 to produce literature on the potential of post-traumatic stress symptoms or disorder. The researchers gave (N=189) male and female officers exposed to violence during the 2014 Ferguson protests a battery of measurements designed to assess for prior trauma history, demographic information, and mental health outcomes. The writers believed that women would be more likely to experience post-traumatic stress symptoms because they are thought to be more empathetic. The writers found that the greater empathy that women officers have for community members, the greater the level of post-traumatic stress symptoms they experience. They stated that men did not experience the same phenomenon (Beagley et al., 2018). The writers are well-known researchers representing organizations for high credibility in research, strengthening the findings. This source was a well-written and well-supported research paper with a robust discussion on methodology and findings, but it was not as relevant to the topic as hoped. The authors discounted the potential of PTSD in male officers on the grounds of gender and an associated reduced empathy, which does not appear to be the case with the officers I have spoken with. The sample size (N=189) was more than appropriate as they included officers from other communities since the Ferguson PD comprises 62 officers. Although

not clearly stated, the theoretical framework appeared feminist and appropriately aligned with their topic.

### **Summary**

Although TI is well researched, I did not find any research related to officers who had already left the field of police work. The research did not present post-turnover perceptions of why officers left before retirement. It could be, in part, the way that police culture views those who left as almost invisible, speaking about former law enforcement officers in the past tense. From an outsider's perspective, the culture of this profession appears to dismiss officers who left for reasons other than retirement. Although law enforcement organizations have alumni activities, police rarely connect with those who have left the profession (Conroy, 1987; Seidl, 2024).

Most of the research was quantitative, using survey instruments, and focused primarily on officers still "on the job." The literature review solidly reinforces qualitative research using GT, and the fact that no research exists on officers who left the profession before retirement, either before or after the societal events of 2020, lends itself to an interesting study. The extant research supports the contention that police work is stressful. Many articles in this literature review demonstrate that researchers have painstakingly addressed police turnover and psychological health. These factors seem to point toward several reasons why many leave law enforcement as a profession. What is missing from the literature is officers' narratives of their experiences following large-scale events such as the social unrest in 2020 and afterward, and how this relates to officers leaving the profession.

Mourtgos et al. (2020, 2021, 2022) have been the only researchers studying the after-effects of rioting on law enforcement but have focused quantitatively on issues such as increased crime and public trust. They recently completed their Ph.D. and are now an assistant professor at the University of Utah. Mourtgos is a criminologist who is not focused on a psychological perspective of the problem. Quantitative research is the historically preferred method of assessing problems experienced by police officers. There is a good reason for this, as quantitative studies allow for greater participation from a culture that tends to shy away from discussing its problems. *“I got this,” “I am good,”* and *“I am fine”* are three of the most common statements that I hear officers say, and yet, they are planning their exfiltration from law enforcement as a profession. Thus, hearing full narratives from officers regarding deciding on exfiltration is necessary to develop an understanding or insight regarding the phenomenon.

Assumptions as to why officers leave are well-documented in the public domain. As reported in 2023 and 2024 Minnesota legislative meetings, there are organizations with leaders who believe that officers leave because they are *“angry,” “want their money now,”* and are *“lying about their mental health injuries”* (Minnesota Congressional Hearings, 2024). Leadership, policies, work/life balance, family, and job satisfaction are common topics of study where very little new information has emerged. What is missing is the narrative of the law enforcement officer. In almost every quantitative research addressing this dissertation’s topic of interest, there is a discussion of the need for more qualitative research. Therefore, there is support for the research I propose within this dissertation.

General strain theory supports capturing officers' perceptions of what caused them to leave before retirement. CGGT provides a rigorous and systematic approach to analyzing and interpreting this research by giving strict procedures for the researcher to follow. How all of these come together into a deliverable research model becomes more apparent in the following chapter, where I describe the approach to questions in an interview guide and how the literature informs participant recruitment and treatment.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

There are no first-hand accounts of the reasons why officers are leaving before retirement after the events of May 2020 related to their mental health. Efforts to better understand the exodus phenomenon of U.S. police officers are likely beneficial due to the costs to human resources, communities, and the government. This chapter addresses the study's methodology. The Methodology section outlines how participants were selected and how data were collected. I then explain how the data was analyzed and processed in a trustworthy manner. Following this, I discuss ethical considerations that were used throughout the research process.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

This research answered the question, "What reasons do police officers give for leaving their profession pre-retirement in 2020 or later?" Qualitative research with police officers has traditionally been through one-on-one interviews (Adams, 2019; Helfers & Nhan, 2022; Horspool et al., 2016; Warner, 2020). A guided interview approach is a common approach to qualitative research (Laureate Education, 2016b; Mason, 2010; Turner, 2010) that allows the researcher to hear the data and document the experiences from empirical observation (Laureate Education, 2016a, 2016b; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I conducted a narrative research study documenting law enforcement officers' narrative in response to a guided interview (Appendix A) based on the research question. Researchers exploring the area of interest have called for narrative studies as the preponderance of the literature is quantitative (Mourtgos et al., 2020). The voice of law enforcement officers is not substantially represented in the current literature. A narrative study documents explicitly the reasons for officers leaving before retirement.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The primary role of the researcher in a qualitative study is to access participants' experiences through interviews that collect the thoughts and feelings regarding the research question of those directly involved in the field of interest (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sutton & Austin, 2015). The researcher then takes the data collected and establishes patterns, themes, and topics as they begin to emerge and documents the information generated. This is for the good of the academic community and in this case also for the good of law enforcement as a profession, the law enforcement officer, and the communities they serve (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Jamali, 2018; Johansson, 2019; Padgett, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Sutton & Austin, 2015). The researcher must also identify reflexivity, or their role, in the research and with the participants involved. In the case of this research, I was a direct observer in that the data collection method was direct interviews. Interviews were in person or via the Teams online video platform, and audio was recorded using a handheld voice recording device. The interview data were reviewed repeatedly, noting the emerging themes and topics.

### **Relationships**

I have a direct connection to the law enforcement profession, including a more direct connection to the Minneapolis Police Department as their crisis negotiation team mental health consultant, trainer, and negotiator. This could result in researcher bias. However, I am also a mental health professional and owner of an agency that provides mental health, employee assistance programs, critical incident stress, and annual balance check services to law enforcement, first responders, and veterans as a primary provider to many law enforcement agencies. As a mental health professional working with this

population, my role led to a positive reputation among law enforcement organizations. In this context, I ensured that no participants have had a prior personal or professional relationship with me. I leveraged contacts from:

- the Minnesota Police and Peace Officers Association (MPPOA),
- the Law Enforcement Training and Consultation Center (LETAC),
- Meuser, Yackley, and Rowland Law,
- the Invisible Wounds Project (IWP),
- Soldier6,
- the League of Minnesota Cities,
- various law enforcement alumni associations,
- the Special Operations Training Association,
- the Crisis Negotiator's Association of Minnesota,
- Law enforcement officer websites,
- PoliceOne,
- and the various contacts I have throughout the Midwest, from Minnesota to Ohio, for participant recruitment.

My contacts served only as information conduits through which I disseminated information about the study and how to contact me. None of the participants had a prior personal or professional relationship with me.

### **Mitigating Bias and Ethical Issues**

Reflexivity is understanding how the researcher may be influenced by prior experiences, knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs. A second concern includes how bias

may influence and affect the researcher's participation in the data collection and later analysis. To mitigate the potential for bias, I chose CGGT as it strives to remove researcher bias and increase objectivity. CGGT can do this by requiring the researcher to remove preconceptions as much as possible and focus on the rigorous comparison of data samples to allow the theory to emerge independently. The journaling process allows the researcher to address preconceptions and mitigate them. My interview questions were written, rehearsed, and vetted by former law enforcement officers to ensure cultural competency. The goal was to encourage data to emerge through meaningful questions without influencing the respondent. I wanted to enhance the data collection without introducing bias.

None of the study participants had a prior relationship with me or any of my prior clients or colleagues. I ensured that all three of these standards were met by asking the participants if they had any prior connection to my colleagues or me, and how they came to find out about the study. Where there was a conflict of interest (COI), the COI was noted, and the participants were invited to a public presentation of the findings after the dissertation was complete if they desired to attend. Participants with COI were thanked for their time and told approximately when a public presentation of the findings of the study would happen. They were told they are invited to attend.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

I studied the narratives of the reasons why officers left their jobs before retirement after 2020. I recruited volunteers from law enforcement agencies at the state to local levels. The appropriate population for participation in this study was any former officers

who left their jobs before retirement and after May 2020. This could have been through the workers' compensation process or simply quitting without seeking benefits compensation. Ideally, successful recruitment occurred from cities across the United States.

The current study relied on a purposive sampling strategy through referral or snowball sampling. Police culture works through trust communicated by one officer to another through word of mouth (Conroy, 1987; Conroy, 2022; Seidl, 2023). It is possible that there are officers who do not stay in touch with other former officers. To avoid selection bias, the invitation was sent to organizations that still serve the former officers in some capacities, such as through the PERA of the workers' compensation attorneys that serve the former officers. If difficulties arose in sampling, my contingency plan was to request an extension of the deadline. The participant criteria included:

- The officer left the job of law enforcement before retirement.
- The officer left the law enforcement job after May 2020.

In the interest of a thorough exploration of the topic, my goal was to interview 20 participants unless saturation happened first. Once data saturation was met, data collection was considered complete. However, if data saturation was not met after 20 interviews, I would have returned to participant recruitment. I stopped when the data became repetitive. Member checking included asking the participants to review their interview transcripts for accuracy.

### **Instrumentation**

I used an interview guide to record answers to the questions in the interview (Appendix A). I documented the data in NVivo after transcribing the audio recordings.

My rationale for the questions that I asked was based on consulting with former and current wellness coordinators from different police departments who have been close colleagues and who still engage in mental health work with law enforcement officers. Consulted colleagues have agreed that one-on-one interviews, using an interview guide, are the most culturally appropriate way to engage this population without making them uncomfortable. Interview guides are used in law enforcement to garner narratives, as this is something with which they are familiar (Risan et al., 2020). The interview guide is an expected way to approach law enforcement officers in a qualitative study, so long as the interviewer allows for a small amount of time for icebreakers and small talk (Helfers & Nhan, 2022).

The interview guide documented additional questions asked during the interview. The experiences of Helfer and Nhan (2022) indicate that the interviews should include some time for the officer to feel comfortable with the researcher. The researcher is encouraged to answer questions that officers have, as they tend to be curious at first and want to know more about the person they are interviewing (Conroy, 2022; Seidl, 2024). Conroy (2022) further informs the researcher that the officer has probably already done an internet search for the interviewer to ensure they are not meeting with a potential non-supporter or untrustworthy person. The interview script form (Appendix A) guided each interview, beginning with ascertaining eligibility criteria, followed by a collection of descriptive information, and finally moving into hearing the guided narrative experience of each participant. (Appendix C; Meyer, 1918; Tombaugh et al., 1996; Voss & Das, 2024). A Gaussian number generator randomly created a participant identification number to protect the participants' identities.

Based on the questions in the guided interview and the participants' answers, I anticipated more questions would arise. Probing and follow-up questions were derived from the issues and themes the participants endorsed. Other narrative researchers who have studied law enforcement officers state that participants tend to be brief and quick in their narratives, with interviews lasting on average 30 minutes (Helfers & Nhan, 2022).

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

Initially, an email (Appendix D) was sent to all the organizations I know of and was told about that serve law enforcement officers in some capacity. A social media flyer (Appendix E) was posted on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Meta, Craigslist, Kajabi, etc., on specific sites related to law enforcement as I found them. The email was sent directly to points of contact within organizations that expressed support. Participants came from state and local police departments. Volunteers used my WaldenU.edu email address and cell phone number to respond to the call for participants. As participants expressed their willingness to participate, they were contacted by email or phone to be screened. If appropriate for the study, an appointment was made for informed consent and the interview. The document allowed for electronic signatures. The participant could respond by email, "I consent," or they could sign the form if given in person. They were entered as a randomly generated alpha-numeric participant number, not their name. Identifying information was not requested. The only information requested was which police department they served in.

Interviews were scheduled in Teams, which allowed a link to be sent or the in-person location to be entered into the invitation. Two-hour blocks were set aside for the 30-minute interview, which was either in person, by phone, or online via MS Teams or

Doxy.me. The rest of the time was for coding the collected data. As a practicing mental health professional, I have a business associates' agreement (BAA) with MS Teams and Doxy.me, ensuring higher levels of HIPAA protection. Participants could also reject all methods, which then fell on the interviewer to offer the participant a reminder and a face-to-face interview or phone call as appropriate. The researcher sent the participant a reminder two days before their appointment and again two hours before their interview through the method of communication the participant agreed to. The participant could contact me anytime via phone, text, or email. They were then offered a period to ask questions before beginning the recording of the interview.

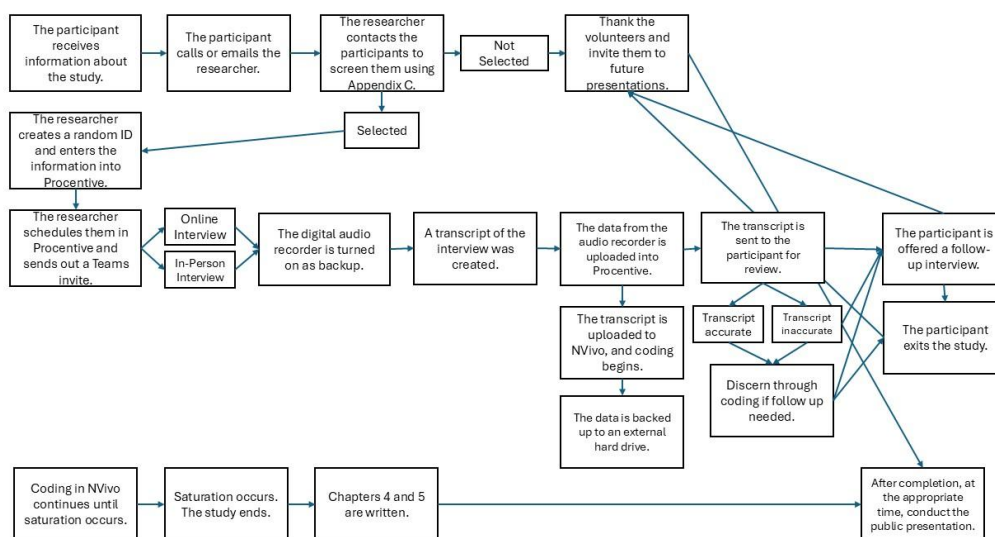
The primary method for collecting data was two handheld digital audio recorders in case one does not work. These recorders have USB and security features that allow me to upload data to my laptop into a cyber-locked folder. The folder was also backed up using an external hard drive. The external hard drive also has a cyber lock feature, so only the researcher can access the raw data. The data was also uploaded into the participant's NVivo folder for additional protection from loss of the interview data. NVivo was used for memo entries and notes from interviews. Content analysis was done using CGGT procedures. NVivo has features that allow coding, such as highlighting and note-taking. This product can be purchased for a limited time at a lower cost for students enrolled in a Ph.D. program. I concluded the data collection portion of the study within three weeks after interviewing all 20 participants; however, data saturation occurred after six participants.

After the interview was transcribed, it was sent to each participant. A follow-up meeting was offered to ask if they believe the transcription is accurate. Any edits or

revisions requested by the participants were noted and made. When the participant thought the transcript was correct and no additional information needed to be provided, they were informed of the phases of the research and offered opportunities to re-engage with the researcher or attend public presentations. Participants were notified when the study ended and thanked for their participation. Additionally, all were informed that no further information was needed. They were reminded of the contact information from their informed consent form (Appendix B). The participants were reminded that they could elect to have the study summary emailed to them along with a link to the email where it was posted. The information presented in Figure 1: Flowchart: Participant Selection and Participant and Data Processing, below, and Appendix F: Checklist: Participant Selection and Participant and Data Processing can help the reader visually understand the sequence of events.

**Figure 1**

### Participant Selection and Data Processing



## **Data Analysis Plan**

### ***Linkage to Research Questions***

Classical Glaserian Grounded Theory calls for using three types of coding: open, selective, and theoretical (Jones & Alony, 2011). During the open coding process, the researcher collects data through participant interviews. Open coding takes place after every interview. Through constant comparison and memoing, the researcher takes the transcript and develops categories by themes and potential sub-categories (Glaser, 1992, 2014c; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Johansson, 2019). CGGT guides the researcher through three layers of coding; the first and most ongoing is open coding. The second is axial coding, where the researcher begins to make connections between the emerging concepts and includes comparing transcripts. Axial coding happens until saturation is met. Finally, selective coding happens after axial coding when one central theme emerges from the axial process. Core categories emerge naturally from the data (Jones & Alony, 2011). Under these core categories, there may be multiple sub-categories with different themes under each core category. The researcher continues to gather data through interviews, memoing, and constant comparison until a third level of sub-categories with themes emerges. The process of developing the theoretical model includes sorting and cross-referencing literature, as the research hypothesis emerges.

### ***Qualitative Data Analysis Software***

NVivo software was used for data analysis. Interview data and observation notes can be saved as individual documents, allowing a short document description for reference. NVivo allows for hyperlinking to other documents, such as recordings, audio files, and other documents, making it ideal for the data collection process this research

requires. Codes appear in NVivo as “nodes,” which are methods for the researcher to indicate the presence of a theme or topic. The software allows coding by opening documents into segments and automatically highlighting the researcher’s node. For a beginner researcher in qualitative analysis, NVivo helps the researcher stay organized and easily search for text or nodes using Boolean phrases and proximity searches (Wong & Pi, 2008).

### ***Discrepant Cases***

In qualitative research, there is the potential for cases that do not match the rest of the data and are identified as outliers. There is a case for data sampling discrepant cases as a data set using negative case analysis. The goal is to find cases supporting an emerging hypothesis rather than refuting it (Roberts et al., 2007). Researchers in qualitative analysis look for discrepant cases and consider the dissonance they create, knowing that it strengthens the hypothesis (Roberts et al., 2007; Booth et al., 2013). Finding and analyzing disconfirming cases leads to more significant trustworthiness in the research endeavor.

## **Issues of Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility**

Credibility was established through data saturation. Data saturation is the point at which no new data is coming forward, and at which any reasonable researcher would continue interviewing more participants. Member checking ensured fidelity in understanding what participants intended to communicate. Reflexivity through memo entries also added credibility as the researcher’s assumptions and beliefs were documented. This helped to ensure that bias does not influence the potential for themes

and topics to arise. Finally, peer review through my committee members is inherently part of this process.

### **Transferability**

The goal was to have law enforcement officers from different parts of the US participate in this study. This helped to increase the participants' variety and add to the potential of describing this phenomenon as more than a localized phenomenon. Evidence shows it is a problem across the US (Adams et al., 2023). To capture that essence, I included a broad base of participants from state-level jurisdiction to local.

### **Dependability**

With its broad scope, this study offers scalability and can be easily repeated. As I delved into this research question in the study, with careful attention, its long-term impact may be supported. I firmly believe that this study needs to be conducted on as large a scale as possible in the future, making dependability on a question that needs an answer today essential. The questions, the criteria for inclusion, and the method of participant recruitment are culturally appropriate and supported by the literature. The hope is that they can be carried out in any jurisdiction in the US and potentially other countries where law enforcement exodus events occur.

### **Confirmability**

I used NVivo QDA software for data organization, annotation, searching, and displaying. CGGT provides disciplined steps toward deriving the hypothesis during data reduction or coding to avoid researcher bias. The CGGT offers criteria for evaluating the quality of the data and analysis. Fitness is the level to which the derived theory represents the collected data. The concept of understanding means that a non-researcher should be

able to come to the same theory based on data analysis and coding. Generality refers to the theory's applicability to changing daily situations—for example, another phenomenon like the increase in police officer murders and attacks when the initial event was not rioting. However, officers still left before retirement in events where law enforcement personnel were attacked. The generality of the hypothesis derived from this study might also help answer that question. Control includes explaining variables that lead to the potential of the hypothesis to bring about change (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). CGGT provides criteria for quality data coding, which assisted in mitigating reflexivity. Through appropriate and effective QDA software that possesses suitable display attributes, researchers and non-researchers alike can visualize how the hypothesis emerged.

## **Ethical Procedures**

### ***Treatment of Human Participants***

Once this dissertation proposal was approved, a research ethics approval application was submitted to the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to gain access to participants. Organizations and participants receive the IRB approval number to increase accountability and ensure compliance with legal and IRB requirements. Recruitment followed IRB approval via word-of-mouth referrals, email, and social media (Appendix D; Appendix E). Data was protected using NVivo and its password features, which allowed only the researcher access to the data. Adverse reactions to the questions I asked could have potentially triggered mental health symptoms for a participant. The screening provided informed consent about potential adverse effects (Appendix B). Participants with mental health concerns were asked if they could schedule a session with their therapist. I offered options for vetted referral

organizations that can take clients if the participant did not have a therapist. Participants could refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. Their data would be deleted and destroyed if they chose to withdraw consent for me to use the data gathered from their interview.

### ***Treatment of Data***

As participants were identified, their information was entered into NVivo. The first name was “Participant,” and the surname was a randomly generated number. Other than the data from their department, which was documented in the address field, no personal data was entered into the program. Raw data will be maintained for five years following the completion of the research. Data will be destroyed after that point by deleting participant NVivo program data records.

### ***Other Ethical Issues***

I used my office for interviews as one option for participants who requested a face-to-face meeting. For those who were not close enough for a face-to-face meeting, an eye-to-eye meeting was offered through a Microsoft Teams meeting. My offices are in two major cities in Minnesota. These spaces are appropriately constructed for privacy and confidentiality. Other options included meetings in public libraries and private meeting rooms, which can be booked. Travel to other out-of-state locations was also possible if a face-to-face interview was preferred. I did not use agency clients as participants, nor did I use data from any contracted agencies. No incentives were given to participants. My referral sources have assured me that officers wanted their narratives documented to “tell the story” (Seidl, 2023).

### Summary

In this chapter, I describe how using CGGT and its principles enables stronger trustworthiness in developing a hypothesis that explains why officers leave law enforcement before retirement following the civil unrest that began on May 25, 2020. Today, in 2025, the numbers continue to increase. CGGT is appropriate as it helps mitigate potential researcher bias through its strict processes. The available applications and software, such as NVivo, help with organization, protection, and data coding. The study procedures can be replicated easily by others, and CGGT's processes are already well-established. Recruitment of participants through the strong networks listed was instrumental in collecting sufficient data to achieve saturation. Chapter 4 of this document describes the study's progression, using the procedures detailed in Figures 1 and 2. The following pages provide further explanation of the details outlined in this chapter regarding the field where the process is tested.

## Chapter 4: Results

The research question was “What motivations do police officers give for leaving their profession pre-retirement in 2020 or later?” A better understanding of these factors can help MH professionals intervene, and the relevant forces can be more proactive in addressing officers’ work cultures and environments. The research question concerned the motivations that police officers cite for leaving their profession before retirement in 2020 or later. The question came from observing the mass exodus of police officers across the nation following May 2020. In this section, I describe the setting within which participants were interviewed and their responses to the procedures. The sample of 20 participants is further broken down into more specific subgroups. The process for data collection and analysis is described, along with the interesting circumstances encountered. The following describes the data analysis methods I employed to gather, transcribe, code, and interpret the LEOs’ statements about their experiences. The evidence of trustworthiness included observations on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, followed by the presentation of the results.

### **Setting**

During the riots beginning in Minneapolis, MN, in May 2020, following George Floyd’s death, the Trauma Recovery Network under the Humanitarian Assistance Project that I developed for first responders was overwhelmed by police officers needing early intervention mental health assistance. I saw firsthand the exodus of police officers unfold as I watched officers’ decline in their mental wellness, then leave the ranks of law enforcement. My reputation as a mental health consultant to law enforcement entities, a crisis negotiator, and a mental health professional directly influenced participants’

recruitment in Minnesota. That reach, however, did not extend to the other cities I attempted to recruit from that also reported exodus-level losses following May 2020. When the call for participants went out, the reputation I had developed amongst LEOs in this region of the nation helped overcome the mistrust that many LEOs report toward mental health professionals. LEOs who participated in this study reported that they asked other LEOs about me and looked up open-source information to learn more. Participants reported concern that this would be another student's endeavor and that no one would act on what they felt needed to be said.

CGGT uses a disciplined approach to collect and analyze data toward the development of a hypothesis about the phenomenon under study (Al-Eisawi, 2022b; Carlin & Kim, 2019a; Chun Tie et al., 2019; Glaser, 2016; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Johansson, 2019a; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023; Urcia, 2021; Urquhart, 2013). Participants were told that, as the investigator, I had no predisposition towards their reasons for leaving and that, although I had spoken to other participants and LEOs, I wanted to hear their personal experiences. Participants saw it as an opportunity to advocate for themselves and their colleagues who may still be in the profession or have already left it. There were strong opinions, and the participants cited events that led them to leave the LE profession and not return. It appeared to me that the participants were passionate and emotional in their responses, viewing their participation as necessary to improve the current social environment.

Regarding the environment, participants reported that, given the current perceived hostility toward their profession, they hoped this dissertation would provide others with their perspective on what is happening to them and their colleagues. Memoing these

responses was important, as, regardless of how objective I remained during the interviews, there were moments where the responses struck me. The role of researcher bracketing in qualitative research is to minimize researcher bias by journaling to set aside personal beliefs, prejudices, and potential preconceptions. Another focus of bracketing is to study the participants' experiences in the research (McCaig, 2025). I endeavored to stay as objective and stoic as possible.

## **Demographics**

### **Sample Description**

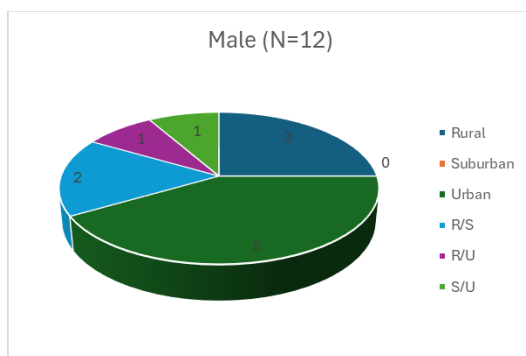
To be included in this study, participants would have left the law enforcement profession before their expected retirement. They would also have had to have gone after May 2020, which is when the exodus was reported to begin (Associated Press, 2020). Forty-five people expressed interest in volunteering for the study, but 22 did not meet the inclusion criteria because they had already retired. Twenty-three participants met the study's criteria. Out of the 23, 20 made appointments to be interviewed. Of the participant sample ( $n = 12$ ), 60% were male. Eleven participants were identified as meeting the inclusion criteria within the first 48 hours of posting the study recruitment materials online. Within 2 weeks, all 45 volunteers were vetted for inclusion, and 23 were offered appointment dates and times; 20 eventually participated. All 20 participants in the study were interviewed within 4 weeks of the start of recruitment.

The participants all came from a single upper Midwestern state, despite the national outreach. Breakdowns of demographics were categorized by type of agency (Figures 2 and 3; i.e., urban, rural, suburban, or a combination). They were classified by years of service (Figures 4 and 5), rank (Figures 6 and 7), and level of jurisdiction (Figure

8 and 9). Among the 12 male participants, approximately 60% worked in rural or a combination of rural, suburban, and urban environments, while the other 40% primarily worked in urban and suburban settings. The female demographics showed that approximately 42% worked in a combination of rural and urban or suburban environments, while the other 58% worked in urban environments. Most participants represented a mix of urban and rural communities, reflecting a balanced representation of the environments in which LEOs work.

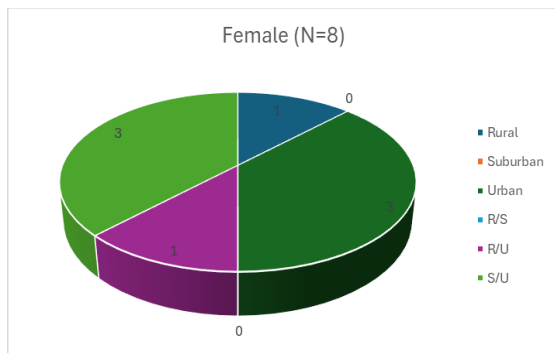
**Figure 2**

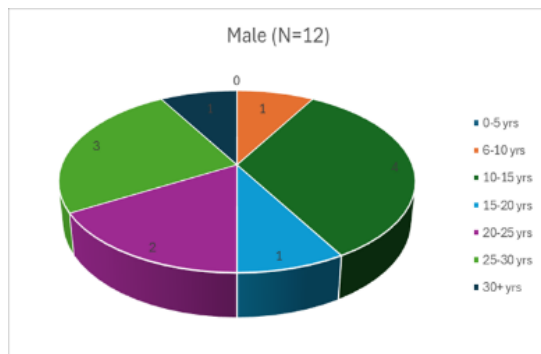
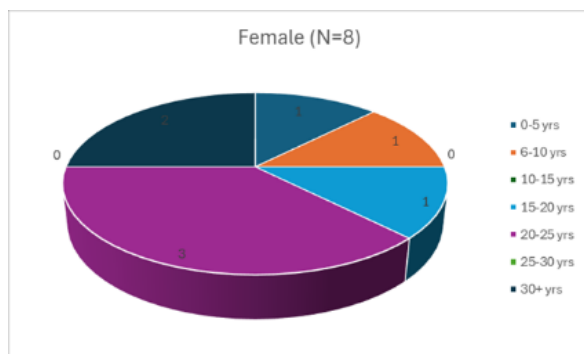
*Agency Type: Male Officers*



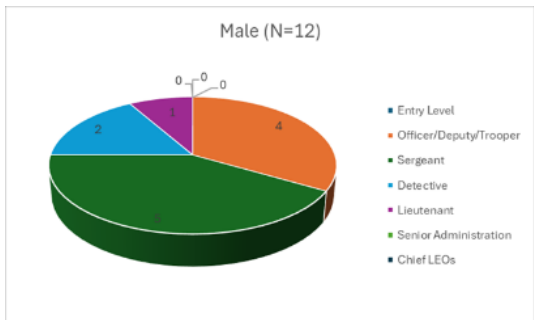
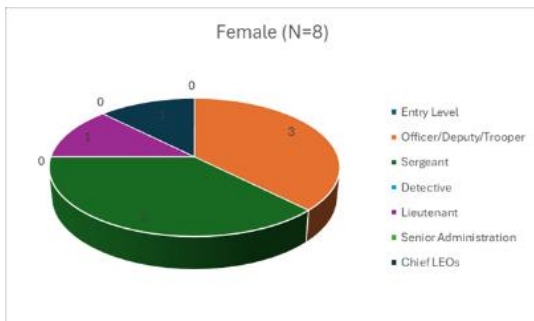
**Figure 3**

*Agency Type: Female Officers*

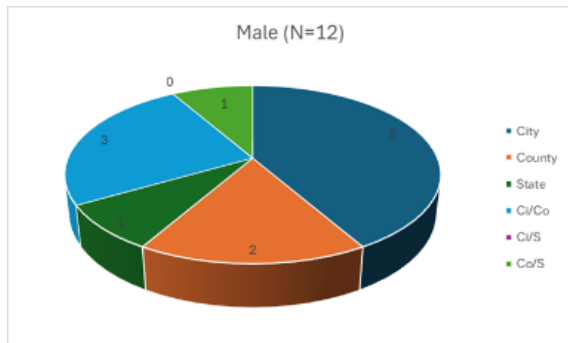
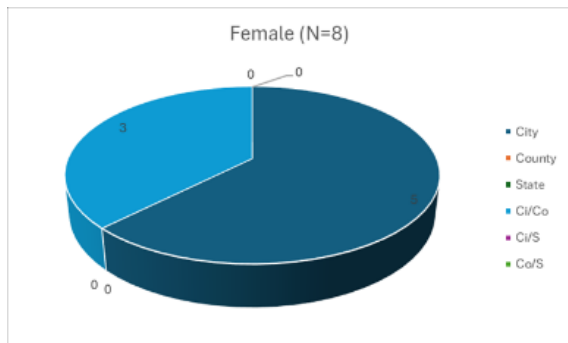


**Figure 4***Time in Law Enforcement: Male Officers***Figure 5***Time in Law Enforcement: Female Officers*

The time in LE shows that half of the male participants served between 6 and 20 years, while the other half served 20 years or more. More than half were senior officers with over 15 years of experience, and the other three had between four and 15 years of experience. The spread was once again even regarding the number of years participants have served, from more junior to senior officers. Half of all participants were sergeants. Two outliers are present in the female portion of the data, including one relatively entry-level officer and one senior administrator. Seven of the overall participants were officers, deputies, or troopers.

**Figure 6***Breakdown by Rank: Male Officers***Figure 7***Breakdown by Rank: Female Officers*

Finally, 75% of the males worked in some city at one point. Approximately 20% of participants were from the county jurisdiction, with one participant from the state level. One hundred percent of the women had experience in a city or local jurisdiction, with half of them also holding positions at the county level. All the participants were White. Age data was not recorded, as two of the original six participants interviewed mentioned that it might reduce anonymity due to their age, rank, and gender being combined.

**Figure 8***Level of Jurisdiction: Male Officers***Figure 9***Level of Jurisdiction: Female Officers***Data Collection**

Most participants ( $N = 16$ ) met online via an MS Teams or Doxy.me video meeting. Four of the 16 participants met via Doxy.me because MS Teams became complicated for them. Three participants came to my private office during hours when no one else was present, or, in one case, only a front desk administrative employee was setting up for the day. Each virtual meeting took place from a private office used for psychotherapy, where I sat alone with my laptop. Sixteen participants logged on via their meeting link, and I could see they were all in a space with privacy. One participant had to

call in because they were in a setting with a problematic internet connection. In the case of the participant who called in, at one point the connection dropped and at another point a small child interrupted the interview. Of the participants online, one participant's spouse interrupted and spoke to me, asking to ensure confidentiality. All the volunteers expressed interest by email at my WaldenU.edu email address. A quick reply email was sent to ask whether they left after May 2020 and before retirement. Once the participant confirmed they met the inclusion criteria, they were sent an email asking them to either print and sign the informed consent form or reply with "I consent". All but two responded to the email with "I consent." The other two printed off the forms, signed them, and returned them via email.

Once received, the participants were offered interview slots over the next two weeks on a "first-come, first-served" basis. As explained previously, 20 participants attended their appointments. One participant out of the original 23 volunteers did not show up and did not respond to a follow-up email offering alternative options. Two did not respond to the offer of an interview. All respondents were interviewed within 4 weeks of the start of the recruitment process. The interviews began by informing the participants that they could stop the interview at any time or drop out if they wished to. All participants agreed to continue. At that point, they were reminded that the interviews would be audio-recorded so that I could produce a transcription for coding purposes. There was no video recording. Once the final question was answered, the primary and backup recording devices were shut off, and the participant was informed of the next steps. In most cases, it was the participants who asked about what happened next.

The .WAV files from both recording devices were uploaded into NVivo under the participants' randomly derived Gaussian numbers. The secondary recording device failed after the 17<sup>th</sup> participant; however, the primary handheld recording device was sensitive enough to pick up online interviews. Once the transcription was created, the participant was emailed an offer to review their transcript and provide additional information, suggestions for corrections, and redaction requests. Participants were given until the day of the last interview to respond with corrections, etc., except for the two who were being interviewed on the last day. They were given more time, but all 10 who responded to the offer to review their transcripts concurred with the transcript. This signaled the beginning of the first wave of NVivo coding.

There were no variations in the data collection plan presented in Chapter 3. All the responses came from one Midwestern state, but they ranged across the state. There was an almost immediate wave of responses and interest within hours of posting on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and via email to pre-reconnoitered points of contact. The second group of volunteers, the other 22, who did not meet the inclusion criteria because they had fully retired, pointed out that they would have stayed longer if not for changes in stressors that led them to retire early. This is the generation of LEOs who were recruited during the Clinton Crime Bill Era, which aimed to increase the number of LEOs in the profession. They are all retired, but they left earlier than they originally planned.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Inductive Process**

Coding began with NVivo, starting with the first participant whose transcript was ready to move forward. An example of coding a participant statement and how I arrived

at the codes, follows the participant's statement on the first question of the questionnaire. The initial phase of line-by-line coding is referred to as open coding (Thornberg et al., 2023). Following open coding, the themes, topics, and categories that arose were evaluated for relationships during axial coding. Items, topics, or issues revealed themes, which were then categorized. Finally, once the codes had been broken down into categories, selective coding revealed a hypothesis. The idea was to identify specific topics that appeared similar and then assign them familiar names. For example, accumulation of job stress, critical incidents, family stress, belief that the administration does not support the officer, belief that media outlets report in an unfair or biased way against law enforcement, are all topics that themes like quality of support, stress, beliefs, amongst others would connect.

### ***Open Coding***

Open coding of the 20 participant transcripts could have stopped after six participants, as saturation was reached. However, I used the open coding process on the first 10 transcripts reviewed by participants before stopping. This was primarily due to the speed at which interviews were scheduled and conducted, transcripts were created, and transcripts were sent to participants for review before being returned for coding. Initial coding revealed topics related to mental health, community support, supportive and unsupportive experiences, and references to therapy, policies, and social issues. In some studies, hundreds of themes or topics often arise. For this study, the focus was on statements related to the job of law enforcement and the motivations for leaving the profession. There were instances where participants may have started discussing their activities during the interview or their vacation plans, which were considered irrelevant to

the research question and were therefore not coded during the open coding process.

Thirty topics emerged during open coding. A breakdown of how many coded files mentioned the topic and how many comments participants made about it is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1***Open Coding Topics*

Topic	Name	Files	References
1	Admin	10	60
	Supportive	3	4
	Unsupportive	9	56
2	Age	1	2
3	Anger	3	4
4	Community support	10	37
	Supportive	1	1
	Unsupportive	10	36
5	Critical incidences	2	7
6	Family	10	12
	Impact on family	6	7
	Unsupportive	4	5
7	Fear of punishment	5	12
8	Financial stability	1	1
9	Job has changed	1	1
10	Media	5	17
11	Mental health	10	90
12	Accumulation of stressors	8	40
13	Confidence	1	1
14	MH injury	8	26
15	Resilience	3	5
16	Stigma	4	9
17	Therapy/therapist	4	5
18	Wellness	3	4
19	Missing the job	10	13
20	Peers	9	13
	Supportive	6	13
	Unsupportive	3	10
21	Physical injury	4	14
22	Policies and laws	4	7
23	Politicians	8	39
24	Portrayal as racist	2	2
25	Purpose	1	2
26	Recommendations to admin	3	4
27	Retention potential	6	11
	Yes	1	3
	No	5	8
28	Riots	7	14
29	Safety	5	6
30	Staffing	2	3

Administration was a significant topic, as nine of the 10 coded transcripts included 59 references to unsupportive administrative leadership; one participant commented on supportive leadership, and three participants provided recommendations for leaders to consider. Age was mentioned twice by the same participant as a motivation for leaving. Three participants reported anger in four statements. Anger was also reflected in other categories, including administration, media, community, and political figures. Thirty-six statements across the 10 coded transcripts reinforced the finding that LEOs experienced a lack of community support. In one participant's statement, they said they still received some support from individuals who lived in their areas of coverage, but that outsiders from that community were unsupportive.

Family arose as a topic in seven interviews. One participant stated that their family no longer wanted them to pursue a career in law enforcement. Seven felt well supported by their family in their decision to leave. Two made six statements on how complex the job was for the family after May 2020.

The fear of imprisonment was mentioned in five of the coded transcripts, with 12 references. Officers stated that they might have to defend themselves and end up in prison. Critical incidents emerged as a topic for discussion in two interviews, as reflected in seven statements. "Job has changed" was mentioned by one participant in one statement, but it was raised indirectly by all 10 as they described what the job was like before, during, and after May 2020. Statements like "devastation on how everything changed", "the job – it's changed immensely. Part of that is the extremely high-profile nature of critical incidents", "huge change in roles", and "that changed over the course of

even my career. The way that the public interacted with LE from 2009 to the 2020-time frame. Tide changed”, depict the way LEOs saw the profession.

The media’s depiction of law enforcement officers was raised in five interviews through 17 references, which were deemed pejorative and misleading to the public. LEOs made comments like, “Those who were for you bought into the national media narrative. Media was barraging us continually,” and “When your elected officials don’t say they support you, the public, who is led by the media, doesn’t support you. Little by little, your foundation crumbles”. The participants supported their beliefs about the media frequently throughout each interview. “Officers were vilified by the media and state politicians.” “No truth by politicians and media on any cases. They want the narrative that systemic racism is rampant in LE.” It was becoming apparent that the media is always there as a static variable. Still, the narratives they produced were seen as a major swayer of the communities LEOs served. Confidence decreased for one participant who stated this was a significant influence on their decision to leave law enforcement. Still, it was related to the way the media made it difficult to do the job: “Nightly news reports were not accurate. They took away the confidence of being able to go and do your job and do the best you could in a very fluid situation.”

Mental health issues were frequently discussed throughout the interviews. However, one participant reported that this had been a problem for seven years, and their situation continued to worsen during 2020, ultimately becoming more than they could handle over the last five years. Participants reported surprise at how much harder the profession was than they had thought before becoming a LEO. Statements like, “If I had to do it all over again, take the physical side out of it, and it was just the mental health

side of it, I don't know that I would ever do it again." There seemed to be a dependence on the community, legislators, and administrators to help in taking care of their mental health. One participant summarized what other participants were saying in this statement: "What do I do with all the mental and physical baggage? I think I deserve what the outcome was. I think that all that stuff leading up to it caused me to be where I'm at. Put through the wringer to get it. I get it, legislators work on dollars and cents. Maybe if you put some things in place, I wouldn't be where I am today. Hopefully they invest in people like me who did it for a long, long time and put money towards mental health and physical health for up-and-coming police officers.

The accumulation of stressors was mentioned as a pre-existing condition before May 2020 in eight of the 10 transcribed interviews. Forty statements revealed that this was ongoing, but it intensified during and after the social unrest of May 2020. Appendix A was my interview guide. Halfway through each interview, participants were asked to describe their mental wellness before, during, and after May 2020. The responses were consistent across all participants. Participants said, "It didn't get really bad until right after Floyd", "I think that I started going to therapy prior to it all, and I definitely felt it harder after the riot", and "Before I was a mentally healthy and stable cop and well-prepared officer. During, I don't remember specific things around stuff that happened around 2020. My mental health today is significantly better than it was during and after but is not on par with where I was at prior to May of 2020," as examples

In response to the first question on motivations for leaving the profession, eight participants, through 26 comments, specified physical injury as one of the reasons they left the profession. "Numerous injuries", "For me it was a medical injury that surfaced

between military and law enforcement”, “Sustained a physical injury while on duty”, were common. There is, however, a stigma associated with leaving due to mental health reasons compared to physical health reasons. Participants stated that “The Difference between mental health injury and medical injury. Mental health was deemed like checking out and quitting on their guys. They were blacklisted.”

Resilience while leaving came up five times through three interviews. Ten participants reported that therapy was used as a resiliency factor. Three participants made references to wellness programming, which included peer support programming. Peers or partners were reported to have an impact on how the participant felt upon leaving. Six of the nine participants reported that their peers were supportive of their decision to leave, making it easier for them to leave the profession. In contrast, three stated that their peers did not treat them well after they decided to leave law enforcement, which reduced their resilience. Nine times across four interviews, the stigma of mental health was mentioned, and speaking about mental health was either a resilience factor or a factor causing mental health difficulties. Physical injury was a primary or secondary cause in four of the 10 coded interviews, with 14 references to the injuries.

Policies and laws changing in departments, jurisdictions, and states were mentioned in four coded transcripts seven times. Somewhat related, politicians, government officials, or elected officials were cited in eight of the 10 transcripts, 39 times, as reasons law enforcement officers left the profession. The precinct being surrendered by politicians and administrators was mentioned in two comments across two of the 10 coded transcripts. The precinct is considered a home to LEOs, much like a fort is to soldiers. “Surrendered” refers to when LEOs are ordered to leave the precinct and

allow rioters to take it over. Some participants felt that, given the lack of support and the surrender of precincts, safety after May 2020 was a concern. This was cited in five transcripts as a reason for leaving the profession six times. A decrease in safety due to staffing reductions emerged three times in the two coded files. Riots themselves were referenced in seven coded interviews 14 times.

“Portrayed as racist” was coded in two transcriptions as they were referenced twice. This was a significant stressor for these two participants. One officer felt that they perceived a lack of purpose after the communities turned on LE. Nevertheless, among the 10 coded transcripts, 7 participants made 13 references to missing the job. Retention potential was not a reason for leaving, but rather a response to the question on the interview questionnaire, to which five of the 10 coded participant transcripts stated that they could have been retained, and the other five said that they could not at the point they were at.

Through open coding, I performed a cursory review of the other ten non-coded transcripts to see if anything new emerged. Nothing new was evident. Transcripts were sent to participants regularly for their review. As transcripts were returned, they were coded. The information came in quickly, allowing for axial coding to happen simultaneously with ongoing open coding.

### ***Axial Coding***

During axial coding, relationships emerged amongst some of the topics from open coding. The themes in Table 2 provide the relationships among topics broken down into 14 themes. The names are ones that I came up with that seemed descriptive and logical. “Participants” refers to the combination of the interview transcript, the interview guide,

the typed answers from participants, and the recording of the interview itself. So, participant 4.250's recorded interview, reviewed transcript, and interview guide responses are in a file. NVivo automatically creates the headings. The references column depicts the number of times the topic was referenced in 10 coded files during open coding.

**Table 2***Axial Coding Themes*

Name	Files	References
Administration	10	61
Supportive Experiences	3	5
Unsupportive Experiences	9	63
Recommendations To	3	5
Age	1	2
Community Support	10	55
Supportive Experiences	1	1
Unsupportive Experiences	10	36
Portrayed as Racist	2	2
Riots	7	14
Family	1	2
Impact on Family	6	7
Supportive Experiences	4	5
Fear of Getting in Trouble	5	12
Financial Stability	1	1
Job has Changed	1	1
Media – Unsupportive	5	17
Mental Health	10	106
Accumulation of Stressors	9	43
Critical Incidences	2	7
Psychological Injury	8	26
Resilience	3	5
Therapy	4	5
Wellness	3	4
Stigma	4	9
Peers	8	15
Supportive Experiences	6	13
Unsupportive Experiences	3	10
Physical Injury	4	14
Political Support - Unsupportive	8	42
Post LEO Experience	10	26
Having Purpose	1	2
Missing the Job	7	13
Retention Potential	0	0
No	5	8
Yes	1	3
Safety	6	9

The visual representation in this table highlights that mental health was the most common reason for leaving the profession, followed by administrative support, then community support, and finally, political support. Media was mentioned in half of the coded transcriptions but was kept separate, as during axial coding it was noted that media influenced the community. Statements like, “People that you thought were for you were totally against you because they just read this national media narrative, and of course, no explanations as to what really happened. Right! Like there’s no explanation, “...because the public has been and is being fed all this stuff through the media”, and “I’m someone that had no use of force before this policy change and now suddenly, my use of force has skyrocketed. Just so that they could say in the media, Oh, look at these police officers, you know, their use of force is just going up and up,” are examples of statements made. These examples illustrate a correlation with the community yet remain separate entities; therefore, they were advanced to selective coding.

The theme of “Post LEO Experience” depicts what participants state their experience has been since they decided to leave the profession. Since it did not influence their motivation to go, it was not considered further in the selective coding phase. The theme of mental health appeared to be present before, during, and after critical incidents. Still, participants stated they experienced an increase in negative mental health symptoms after the events of May 2020.

### ***Selective Coding***

Of the 30 codes listed in open coding, nine in axial coding — “age”, “financial stability”, and “the job has changed” — appeared as stand-alone codes. Other participants

did not repeat them, so they did not move on to selective coding. The themes that did not progress to selective coding are referenced in the “Discrepant Cases” section of this chapter. The reference to peer support during the process of leaving was already after the decision to leave the profession but is essential in understanding a mitigating factor in the culture of law enforcement towards psychological health injuries compared to physical injuries. Missing the job of law enforcement was also an after-the-fact theme. Still, it was beneficial in understanding the difficulty of the decision to leave the profession, which is discussed in the results section in more detail, along with the issues faced by peers.

The nine themes in axial coding were categorized into perceived influences on existing vulnerabilities and reasons for officers’ departures from the law enforcement profession from May 2020 to the time of their retirement. The related subcategories were derived from participants’ statements. I also described the perception of the influence as either pejorative or supportive based on the narratives.

**Table 3**

*Perceived Influences on Existing Vulnerabilities*

Theme	Influence on	Type of influence	No. of responses
Media	Admin, government, community	Portrayed as racist, villainous, morally corrupt	17
Peers	LEO retention after decision to leave	Unsupportive of partner based on the type of inquiry	10
Mental health	LEO decision to leave	Psychological injury (PTSD, MDD, etc.), accumulation of stressors, lack of resilience, stigma to receive therapy	90

Table 4 addresses the research question of why officers are leaving the profession before retirement, and after May 2020. This table is the most directly related to answering this question. The key theme is a lack of support, and the key supporting elements relate

to their perceptions of administrative support, political or governmental leadership support, and community support. The participants' statements are only a few of the many responses that resemble this sampling.

**Table 4***Reasons Law Enforcement Officers Leave the Profession*

Theme	Statements	No. of responses
Administrative leadership support	<p>“Severe lack of leadership at a time when we needed leadership. I didn’t feel supported. I think that led to my diagnosis of PTSD”</p> <p>“I had really strong feelings that I was not going to get the support to sustain me. I suspect that’s fairly consistent.”</p>	56
Government leadership support	<p>“Probably the lack of support that we felt from our admin, but even LTs, commanders, inspectors, and the city itself. I have PTSD. I truly believe that I would have probably stayed 30 years if I had known there was some support</p> <p>“I was not supported by my governor, right down to the city council, chief of police, and chief of police and chief staff”</p> <p>City administration and higher administration are not supportive of very minor things</p>	39
Community support	<p>I think even some level of support from the admin or the city council Maybe from the people of the city itself. Speak up and say they want police officers around. Not having that support reiterated in my own mind and reinforced the feeling of abandonment and helplessness</p> <p>The silent majority. That doesn’t really help me. In my opinion, the second supported the police, they were immediately racist. Thirty-year-old females giving me the finger. A White person sticking a phone in your face to record you. Someone runs up and starts recording it. I’m not sure if I can keep doing this. You’re always thinking that someone is running up to me, but I don’t know what they were going to do</p> <p>The public was hit and miss because there were many who hated the police, and there were a lot of supporters-such a woke community. Woke is a made-up term to people who think and perceive themselves as being a higher nature than everybody else. They believed that the police were evil and that there was systemic racism, and we were brutal, awful people</p>	36

Participants reported that their physical injuries, accumulation of stressors, symptoms of psychological distress, primarily post-traumatic stress disorder, lack of resiliency factors, and the cultural stigma were compounded by the lack of support from administrations, government officials, and the communities they served. Participants reported that the media's depiction of law enforcement, combined with a lack of governmental support, resulted in a lack of community support. In most cases, participants reported not perceiving their administrations as supportive.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Discrepant cases are those that deviate from the rest of the narratives. There were three discrepant cases in this study in which LEOs reported leaving for reasons other than a perceived lack of support. No negative cases were found. To ensure that discrepant and negative cases were accounted for, all transcripts were reviewed after the interview to identify additional observations and deviations.

The first observation was that three participants did not speak negatively about their chief law enforcement officers. There was a difference in how they viewed their administration. In one of these cases, their administrators were very supportive in helping the LEO leave on their own terms and without fighting their workers' compensation claim. Another LEO spoke highly of their administrator. They were the only LEO from that agency and at that jurisdictional level. It appeared that there were differences in that organization regarding how command is portrayed. The third LEO had a more intimate knowledge of being in command and, as such, was also a chief law enforcement officer.

The other deviant cases were two individuals who left specifically and wholly because of physical injuries. They could no longer do the job, but they left before realizing they would have had to quit anyway due to the injury. These LEOs reported greater peer support and less difficulty after leaving the profession. This also supports the earlier notion that when LEOs leave the profession for reasons other than physical injury, they tend to be viewed more pejoratively, making the transition more psychologically complex.

One participant mentioned financial stability as their reason for leaving the job. They did not feel the need to stay given their level of economic well-being. This case is represented in both categories above: the LEO sustained physical injuries, had positive experiences with their administration, and had no financial limitations. In this case, it made more sense for them to leave when and how they did with the full support of their leadership.

Discrepant cases were actively sought out even after saturation was met. All 20 interviews were scrutinized for anything that might challenge the emerging hypothesis. In some cases, such as those involving physical injury, it was observed that when there was only bodily injury, a less pejorative perspective appeared to be projected on the outgoing LEO. Participants made comments about their mental health conditions, like, "Police administrators need to know that PTSD is real", and "Before that time, I think there was a lot of things that could have been done to help raise awareness around PTSD for departments not to shun people and kind of push forward the stigma associated with PTSD and the traumas that cops suffer from throughout their entire careers. But I mean, humans aren't made to see the amount of trauma that we see daily. And unfortunately, it

changes you as a person, and without you knowing, having awareness, having help, allowing there to be an environment where you can speak up and say ‘hey, like this affects me’.” One participant emphasized that “PTSD is real. People aren’t faking it. This isn’t a [explicative] joy ride. It’s a struggle we deal with every single day that we wake up.”

In reviewing the NVivo codebook summary for references focused on the experience of this mental health condition and the message to leaders, 28 like statements could have been identified for quotation. The observation that this diagnosis and its symptoms are a part of the job and that, for whatever reason, officers leaving with PTSD feel shunned by leaders was very prominent in the narratives of these participants. To that point, only one participant made discrepant comments about officers leaving with PTSD that seemed to depict PTSD as a fake reason for leaving the profession.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Member checking was conducted by asking participants for general information, particularly regarding their completion of Skills or an official Academy that led to employment as a LEO. Data saturation took place after the sixth transcript was coded. I elected to code four more transcripts, which further supported the conclusion that saturation had been achieved. This further strengthened the themes that emerged from axial coding of the first six transcripts. A cursory review of the other 10 transcripts revealed no new topics or themes. Reflexivity was documented through memoing, a form of journaling conducted after the coding process. My memo entries focused on how the interview affected me and on the new insights I gained from it. After conducting six

interviews, I noticed that my memo entries were becoming increasingly similar, with few new ideas emerging.

### **Transferability**

I wanted to have law enforcement officers from different parts of the US participate in this study to evidence a nationwide phenomenon. Evidence indicates that it is a widespread problem across the US (Adams et al., 2023). To capture that essence, I invited a diverse group of participants from state-level jurisdictions to local levels across multiple states. However, the first 20 participants were all from the same state in the upper Midwest. Nevertheless, the participant pool was highly representative of rural and urban settings, male and female participants, years of experience, and rank. This strengthened transferability, as the first six participants whose transcripts were coded were representative of nearly every type of community in the US. In my memo, I expressed how the conditions of some participants personally affected me. Already being a mental health professional, it was challenging to observe the condition of some of the participants, but this did not detract from a professional interview. It was simply an observation, based on post-interview feedback, that the levels of healing differed significantly based on several variables.

### **Dependability**

This study demonstrated scalability and repeatability. It was also evident that this population desires to be heard. Although this study was conducted in a discrete geographic area, the current LEO exodus is reported as a nationwide problem. No adjustment was needed to what was stated in Chapter 3.

## **Confirmability**

Establishing confirmability requires that the researcher maintain an audit trail, a detailed account of how data was collected and processed, the use of triangulation by reviewing different types of data, the employment of an external reviewer, journaling to account for reflexivity, and the involvement of participants for accountability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Johansson, 2019; Shenton, 2004; Smith, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Sutton & Austin, 2015; Trigueros, 2018; Yale University, 2015). Other than the use of an external reviewer outside of this dissertation committee, I will explain the different concepts, beginning with the basic communication between the participants and me.

### ***Audit Trail***

To ensure the findings are based on data collected from participants rather than on my potential bias, I maintained an audit trail, documenting every interaction with every participant who met the inclusion criteria. I kept the email the respondent sent, wishing to volunteer for the study, and followed with my appreciation for their interest, asking whether they left law enforcement after May 2020 and before they retired from the profession. Within the same email chain, once the volunteer responded that they met the criteria or had questions about them, I sent them what they needed to know, along with the informed consent. I added instructions for consent and asked them to respond with “I consent” or to submit their signed consent form. I offered interview appointment options and sent a link from MS Teams to confirm the appointment. The Doxy.me link was included as an option in case Teams fails. Each email interaction was date and time-stamped. If a phone conversation took place, an email confirming the conversation and

outlining the next step was sent. All the emails were downloaded and saved on an encrypted drive in a separate folder from the interview data, so that the participant's identity and the data collected from them would not be linked. This process data was also saved the same way on my laptop and on an external hard drive.

### ***Transferability***

The participant population in this study reflects the narratives of large-city, urban, suburban, and rural communities. The narratives also reflect the views of male and female officers accurately compared to the census of the police officer population across the United States. The different levels of jurisdiction this study was also attempting to capture in the data ranged from the local police department to the county to state law enforcement agencies. The narratives also captured LEOs across the span of a career, from officers still in their first five years of service to those at the end of a law enforcement career who had left prior to retirement. Officers of color were not represented. As mentioned in Chapter 5, this could be because officers of color are more reluctant to participate in research with their White counterparts (Barrett et al., 2017).

### ***Triangulation***

The interview was conducted and recorded using two separate recording devices in case one failed, which happened on six occasions. One of the recording devices ran out of memory but continued to signal that it was recording. All the data was captured through my primary recorder and then uploaded into NVivo transcription. I also typed responses directly into the interview guides, documenting things the recorder could not capture, such as when a participant teared up or behaved in a way that might have been

remarkable. All three data forms were uploaded to NVivo for coding. NVivo software was crucial for organizing the data.

### ***Reflexivity***

I journaled after almost every interview directly into NVivo with a note attached to the participant's interview transcript. I left each journal remark with a recommendation to myself for the following interview and would often review those journal entries. Given that I am a mental health professional already, I would also discuss with a colleague who was instrumental in helping me understand my approach to interviewing LEOs. I would ask him questions about terms or idioms that I did not understand or was unsure of but did not feel appropriate to ask the participant. I would talk about specific reactions I had with them or my business partner.

### ***Participant Involvement***

Participants were asked to review the transcript of their interview and respond with additional comments or make corrections if they wanted. On a few occasions, participants wanted certain items left out or redacted because they could reveal their identities. After the first two interviews, I made sure not to ask information regarding age and to ensure that age, rank, and gender were not combined, as the participants felt that other officers would be able to discern who they were. Participants were told about the progress and steps in the process towards completion of this dissertation. Upon completion of this dissertation, the participants, along with the rest of the LEO community and anyone else interested, will be invited to a presentation on the findings and recommendations of this study. Participants also assisted in recruiting other

volunteers for the study by explaining the study to others through word of mouth.

Participants were not asked to do so.

### **Results**

The research question was “What motivations do police officers give for leaving their profession pre-retirement in 2020 or later?” The question focused on the motivations police officers cite for leaving their profession before retirement in 2020 or later. To recap, Table 5 depicts how topics during open coding were combined to create themes in axial coding. Table 6 takes the themes from axial coding and how they became the themes that remained in selective coding. The data will be further analyzed in Chapter 5 as to how the coding led to interpretation.

**Table 5***Open Coding Topics to Axial Coding Themes*

Topic	Theme	Comment
Admin	Administration, politicians, government	Static factor
Fear of punishment	Administration, politicians, government	Lack of support
Staffing	Administration, politicians, government	Lack of support
Policies and laws	Administration, politicians, government	Lack of support
Politicians	Administration, politicians, government	Static factor
Anger	Mental health, administration	Various themes
Safety	Mental health, administration	Various themes
Critical incidences	Mental health	Dynamic factor
Mental health	Mental health	Dynamic factor
Accumulation of stressors	Mental health	Dynamic factor
Confidence	Mental health	Dynamic factor
MH injury	Mental health	Dynamic factor
Resilience	Mental health	Dynamic factor
Stigma	Mental health	Dynamic factor
Therapy/therapist	Mental health	Dynamic factor
Wellness	Mental health	Dynamic factor
Community support	Community support	Dynamic factor
Portrayal as racist	Community support	Dynamic factor
Riots	Community support	Dynamic factor
Media	Media	Static factor
Family	Family	Static factor
Missing the job	Stayed at open coding	Post LEO experience
Recommendations to admin	Stayed at open coding	Post LEO experience
Peers	Stayed at open coding	Post LEO experience
Purpose	Stayed at open coding	Post LEO experience
Retention potential	Stayed at open coding	Post LEO experience
Financial stability	Stayed at open coding	One participant
Age	Stayed at open coding	One participant
Job has changed	Stayed at open coding	Three participants
Physical injury	Stayed at open coding	Three participants

**Table 6***Axial Coding to Selective Coding Themes*

Theme	Selecting coding theme	Comment
Administration, politicians, government	Static factor	Ever present in the LEO profession
Media	Static factor	Ever present in the LEO profession
Family	Static factor	Ever present in the LEO profession
Administration	Lack of support	Reason for leaving
Politics/government	Lack of support	Reason for leaving
Mental health	Decomposition	Reason for leaving
Community support	Lack of support	Reason for leaving

The consensus among participants (i.e., 18 out of 20) can be summarized as follows: “The majority of us didn’t leave the job because of the job. The majority was the stress from the community. We’ve all seen what happened with Floyd. City administration and higher administration is not supportive of very minor things. The pendulum swung further after Floyd” (Participant 6.181) and “I’ve talked to many people. It’s tough to leave something you love so much and are so passionate about and driven to do” (Participant 4.788).

Eighteen of the participants told me that it was hard for them to leave before they were ready to because it did not feel as though it was on their own terms. The two who did not were already at peace with the decision to leave and reported that they may have planned to retire early anyway. When asked this question, nearly every participant teared up. The difficulty of the decision came more as grief and loss than with anger or anticipation for what awaits them later. There was consensus in the data that the decision to leave was made more difficult when peer support was reduced, as well as in how LEOs felt their administrations treated them and, in some cases, local political leaders or entities that represent first responders.

### **Post-LE Experience**

Former officers reported that they needed to “step away to be able to really heal. It helped, but it was not fun.” Many of the participants were at places in their post-LE experience where they were still stuck in dark places related to their mental health. Appropriate referrals were made to mental health organizations vetted to serve LEOs in a culturally responsible manner. Many participants continued with psychological health

treatments that helped them achieve a certain level of healing. One participant said, “It’s still kind of like, not the way you want to go out. I’m content with my decision now. It’s taken therapy to get me there. I felt ashamed and embarrassed. When you start the process, there is no turning back.” There was almost a resignation that once an LEO started psychological health treatment, they would become healthier and realize that returning to the way things currently were in LE was no longer an option. One officer who was not part of this study told me that “it’s like breaking free from an abusive relationship. You go and get therapy, you get better, but when you get better, people tell you that you must go back to the abusive relationship. It just doesn’t [explicative] make sense.”

### **Summary**

There are static factors in LEO’s on-the-job experience. There will always be stress, and critical incidents will inevitably impact their psychological health. When an incident attracts media attention, the reports are usually highly critical of law enforcement. This, in turn, affects the relationship between police administrations and their LEOs, the way elected officials respond to media reports, and, ultimately, the community. LEOs depend on support from administrators and political entities, but they expect some pushback as part of their job. When they lose connection to their communities and support is withdrawn, the LEO succumbs to the impact of static factors in their lives and eventually leaves the profession. In essence, the people they swore to defend turn on them based on misinformation, and they fall into a mental health disorder. The exodus of LEOs can be directly attributed to the way the media portrays them to the public and how those appointed over them further place the burden on the officers

themselves. Without the support of their communities, they lose their resilience and leave law enforcement in large numbers. In the next chapter, I will discuss the lessons learned from this study, including the findings and recommendations for future research, as well as for the psychological health and law enforcement communities on how to mitigate these losses from the ranks of law enforcement.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, Recommendations

This study aimed to explore the firsthand experiences of police officers who left the field before their retirement and after May 25, 2020. The research question concerned the motivations that police officers cite for leaving their profession before retirement in 2020 or later. The study was conducted to help mental health professionals better understand these participants' reported reasons for leaving. The goal was to assist in intervening with LEOs, administrations, and, potentially, government bodies to reduce the number of officers leaving the profession before retirement. Through one-on-one interviews with former LEOs, transcription of the interviews, and coding using CGGT principles and NVivo QDSM, the study found that LEOs rely on community support to remain engaged in their profession despite ongoing stressors. There are static factors in a LEO's job that are known stressors, such as the media's portrayal of LEO actions, the perception that chief administrators do not always support them, and the traumatic and stressful events of their job. The most observed dynamic factor was how LEOs look for and rely on the community's support. When the community turns on the LEO, the LEO's static factors are more pronounced and the officer then decides to leave. This chapter describes the interpretation of the findings, outlines the study's limitations, provides recommendations for future research and potential interventions, and discusses the implications of this study.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Studies that focused on TI were quantitative and did not explicitly examine the United States post-May 2020. However, some of the same subjects came up, such as "burnout," which I called "accumulation of stress," relationship to administration, which

came up as “administration support,” and lack of resources to do the job, which could resemble what I found in safety, staffing, etc. A larger, mixed-methods study could yield a more robust understanding of the retention issues in the United States and abroad. This study provides insight into the potential that, regardless of the negative portrayal of a police incident, officers experience a loss of community in the same way as any other human might.

### **Confirming the Evidence**

Mourtgos and Adams (2021) provided quantitative data suggesting that the events of May 2020 led to excessive turnover in law enforcement across the United States. The researchers cite in their literature review that sustained negative attention (Mourtgos et al., 2020; Nix & Wolfe, 2017), loss of trust and confidence in their leadership (Wilson, 2012; Wolfe & Lawson, 2020), non-mutuality with the public, political leaders, and their administrators (Paoline & Gau, 2020; Schott & Ritz, 2018) leads to “the ultimate act of avoidance which is quitting” (p. 3). These quantitative studies reported different aspects of the same issues repeatedly raised in participant narratives, leading to saturation. Support is diminished following a significant incident, and the media develops stories based on misunderstandings about the role of LEOs (Gauthier & Graziano, 2018). This media coverage further separates LEOs from their administration’s support and political support (Gauthier & Graziano, 2018). When this happens, the already existing symptoms of presumptive mental health disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety become acutely present, and the LEO then chooses to leave the profession altogether.

The sequence of events and results described in the literature was described by participants in this study as presented in the previous chapter. It is common for a LEO's identity to become enmeshed with their profession, and they may have trouble leaving it (Greco, 2022; Kinnaid, 2023; Pederson et al., 2024). The findings here supported what researchers have found about the difficulties of leaving this line of work. In this case, the decision was not easy for any of the participants. However, it was easier for some, particularly those with a physical injury or with an opportunity awaiting them outside of the LE profession. However, out of the 20 participants, only three had opportunities waiting for them outside of law enforcement.

Participants in this study provided their individual narratives and explanations for their motivation to leave the profession. In reviewing the perspectives of other writers on the exodus, such as Woodhouse (2023), Nestor (2024), Lancaster (2024), and Pagonis (2022), these accounts were more opinion-driven than data-driven. Although there is merit to the notions represented by those authors, the narratives in this study did not support their opinions. The following section explains the two most significant arguments posited by other entities.

### **Disconfirming the Evidence**

It was noted in Chapter 2 that, during a conversation before the start of this study, some administrators believed that the sole reason officers left the profession was “because they were angry, so they took their money and left” (League of Minnesota Cities, 2022). This refers to a specific benefit available in one state but not in others. Considering that all the participants came from the same geographical region, it is difficult to determine if this is true in other areas of the United States. The participants’

responses were notable in that, although anger was one of the emotional responses to the way they were treated, it was not the primary one. Betrayal, abandonment, fear for their well-being, fear for their safety, fear of possible imprisonment, etc., were the initial responses. Anger came later as they began the process of leaving. LEOs reported feeling like they did not matter. Retention became a less viable option for the profession. Even so, most participants, particularly those with no other options, experienced a significant loss of purpose and identity upon leaving LE. Sixteen of the 20 participants stated that they missed the job to this day, but that they knew they could no longer do it.

Another idea noted in the literature review is that LEO TI is not a new problem but rather one that has persisted in the same manner over time (Lancaster, 2024). There are multiple reasons beyond the May 2020 riots, which depicted the aggregate loss of officers from 2011 to 2021 as 1% attrition. PERF (2023) did not test for social hostility or criticism from local leaders but did examine the intensity of social unrest (Lancaster, 2024). The data collected in this study do not test the level of intensity, either, since participants reported smaller and less violent protests in more rural communities during the interviews. However, this study collected narratives from officers in large urban and small rural communities, who reported that media criticism led to local leaders and administrations, thereby influencing the community and ultimately prompting them to leave.

### **Extending Knowledge**

There were no studies examining LEOs' narrative perspectives on their experiences of engaging with the public following a significant shift in public support for them and their profession. Researchers from other countries have noted similarities in the

stressors that officers experience, including TI (Alhashmi et al., 2017, 2019; Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Jabeen et al., 2020; Kulachai & Amaraphibal, 2017; Lambert et al., 2017), which is related to some of the same stressors identified in this study. This, being an international issue, creates dissonance between the global observation of the profession and the U.S.-based depictions of LE behavior. What is clear, however, is that the U.S. narrative of the LE profession, as presented by media, political, and administrative leaders, does highlight how LEOs in the United States often feel disenfranchised from their communities (Castellano, 2025; Gall, 2022; Gauthier & Graziano, 2018; James et al., 2020; Jones, 2021; Mourtgos et al., 2020; Robb-Dover, 2023; Violanti et al., 2019; Zemlok, 2022).

Law enforcement is a unique profession in that LEOs choose the community they wish to serve (Johnson & Dolan, 2020). A soldier, for example, is usually deployed to an international locale where they know they may not be welcomed, but do not experience the same disenfranchisement that officers often do from the communities they serve. Disenfranchised veterans frequently end up in the criminal justice system (Uggen & Manza, 2002), more so than LEOs, who report feeling isolated, alone, and angry (Patil, 2018). Soldiers do not choose where they serve. Mental health professionals can extend their knowledge to incorporate lessons learned from potentially the military into the profession of LE.

To depict the findings of the study, in congruence with the interview questionnaire (Appendix A) and how participants described their motivations to leave after May of 2020, I broke this section down into the Before May 2020, During May 2020, After May 2020, Deciding to Leave, and finally Post-LE Experience. This follows

the method used to conduct interviews, utilizing the interview questionnaire, and provides a clearer interpreted understanding of what motivated participants to leave their positions as LEOs.

### **Before May 2020**

Before the Ferguson riots and then again around 2017, support for law enforcement was high and continued to grow (James et al., 2020). The most significant predictor of the public’s perception of police is the media’s portrayal of law enforcement, which, according to researchers, tends to be “unfair” and “unknowing” in its reporting on law enforcement engagements, yet remains a powerful influencer of public opinion (Gauthier & Grazino, 2018). This study revealed participant reports stating that, before May 2020, LEOs were experiencing a higher level of support than at any time preceding the publication date of this document. Table 5 provides a representative sampling of what participants stated about their pre-2020 experience as an LEO. I noticed throughout the data analysis and a review of Chapter 2 literature that there were factors that seemed to be static, in that they appear to be a chronic experience in LE. I observed that the factors that changed the most were dynamic and were reported as interdependent or “dynamic”.

### **Table 7**

#### *Participant Report of Their Condition Before May 2020*

Static Variables	What Participants Said
Accumulation of Stressors	Nine of the 10 coded transcripts included 43 references to stress being part of the job.  “So, you know that that’s all cumulative when you’re going to work every day and putting your gun belt on, and you know when you are at that level of alertness at work all the time, it certainly has a physical toll as far as just kind of physically and just how you view the world. It does have a cumulative toll on your mind and body over time.”
Critical Incidences	Two coded transcripts included seven times the impact of critical incidents on mental health.

Therapy	<p>“One of my therapists once upon a time said, like most people have like seven critical incidents in their life that affect them deeply. Like law enforcement, you can have that in a shift if you’re unlucky enough, right?”</p> <p>Four coded transcripts included five statements indicating that they had seen a therapist before leaving the job.</p>
Wellness	<p>“It was hard. I think that I started going to therapy before it all, but I definitely leaned on it heavily during that 2020 period”.</p> <p>“So before I felt like a million bucks. I felt good. I was stable, capable, doing my job, living a good life.”</p>
Stigma	<p>“Like when I started law enforcement, when you hung out with your crew, you were having beers or whatever, I mean if you kind of had that down feeling moment, they’d just give you another beer. Like nobody really wanted to talk about it It just wasn’t in the culture. It was it was kind of that like, big boys and girls don’t cry.”</p>
Impact on Family	<p>“I know that people around me told me I was very intense and very stressed out, but I don’t think at the time I could really, there just was no time in my head to consider what was going on with me mentally, if that makes any sense”</p>
<hr/>	
Dynamic Variables	
Media	<p>Has generally been considered “unfair” and increases in “unfairness” with critical incidents. (Garthier &amp; Graziano, 2018)</p>
Administration Support	<p>“It probably started during Ferguson riots when leadership wasn’t taking a stand to protect us. National leadership. Started to become a political hot potato, really easy to drop on both sides of the aisle. It started in 2014 but the nail in the coffin was 2020.”</p>
Political Support	<p>“Despite declines in public confidence following the incidents in 2014-2015, trust in the police rebounded in 2017, reaching historical averages.” (James, et. al., 2020)</p>
Community Support	<p>“Really some of the changes began, like Ferguson and things like that are a little bit longer term, but certainly 2020 just changed the character of the job almost entirely, overnight and it just isn’t there isn’t the support for that real law enforcement work.”</p>
Mental Health	<p>“Some of them are probably suffering as badly as I sat not telling anybody. I hope not, but they all know what it’s like to be burnt out, to have PTSD, and be stressed. There’s not a single person in [law enforcement] that doesn’t have PTSD just from the work we do.”</p>

The ebb and flow in support for law enforcement, as directly expressed by participants in their responses to questions about their psychological health perspectives before the May 2020 events, is already described in another study (James et al., 2020). In this study, the accumulation of stress was presented as ever-present; however, due to perceived positive support from the community, participants were able to manage the

stressors. Participants mention that post-traumatic stress disorder is part of the experience of being a LEO. Still, that feeling of support makes it easier to cope with the job's stressors. Chapter 2 describes how past studies have focused heavily on this phenomenon and how officers tend to cope both positively and negatively. In this study, we hear directly from officers that support for law enforcement is on the uptick.

The media has been described as having a pejorative impact on the law enforcement profession (Gauthier & Graziano, 2018). Administrative support was reported by participants as already being low, with significant shifts beginning with the 2014 Ferguson riots. Political and community support began to rebound from 2017 through May 2020. Some things were consistent throughout the experiences of participants, though: the stress of the job is always there, the traumatic incidents are part of the job, family is impacted but generally supportive, there is stigma towards appearing mentally weak, and LEOs are typically unwilling to see therapists because of that stigma towards mental health. Wellness programs were springing up to increase officer resilience, but there did not seem to be much traction yet. All in all, before May 2020, participants reported that the status quo was maintained and that they were managing their stress effectively enough to remain in the profession.

### **During May 2020**

In Table 8, I added statements in the static factors portion that seemed to represent what the support looked like during the events of May 2020 and the subsequent few months. What stood out were the comments made during the social unrest, which depicted the participants' sentiments, as well as the experiences of law enforcement officers before they left the profession. It was evident that this event began to affect the

ability of the LEO who left prior to their anticipated retirement to remain on the job.

Every participant said that it was a landmark event for law enforcement across the nation, but especially as it related to their ability to stay in the profession.

**Table 8***Participant Report of Their Condition During May 2020*

Static Variables	What Participants Said
Accumulation of Stressors	Same
Critical Incidences	Same
Therapy	“It was hard. I think that I started going to therapy before it all, but I definitely leaned on it heavier during that 2020 period.”
Wellness	Same
Stigma	Same
Impact on Family	<p>“You know, we didn’t see much of each other. I think, you know, I was working 14, 17 days in a row, 16-hour shifts. Even though we lived out in the country, she would go to my parents’ house on weekends when she wasn’t working, because she was afraid our family would be exposed and people would show up there. We had minimal in-person contact during the riots. We talked to each other on the phone, but that was essentially it.”</p> <p>“The media and society have turned on LE to say I don’t trust them and they are not trained well.”</p>
Dynamic Variables	
Media	<p>“Officers were vilified by the media and state politicians”. “No truth by politicians and media on any cases.”</p> <p>“LE is the community caretaker. The media keeps saying that LE is terrible. You got that wrong.”</p> <p>“When the good normal person is having a stance like that, coming to a conclusion based on what is seen in the media, they don’t understand the split-second decisions. When good people transition, it’s hard for those in uniform to swallow.”</p> <p>“Those who were for you bought into the national media narrative.</p>
Administration Support	<p>“Oftentimes in the community, the media was pushing this narrative that LE was terrible to people.”</p> <p>“I have known other officers who have left from other agencies early, and it’s basically that you don’t feel valued. And there are several examples of that. How do you retain law enforcement officers who are willing to do the job and put themselves in harm’s way, but also want to feel valued? It’s my department and other departments that are not putting a value on their officers by the way they’re reacting.”</p> <p>“...on how upper-level administration could have supported cops that would have been hugely beneficial.</p> <p>“ I would say most of them left just because they were feeling so unsupported. They didn’t feel like there was any morale or consistency or support.”</p> <p>“For me, it really trended into the crisis of mental health, but also extreme feelings that I wasn’t going to get the support I would need to make it a sustainable job at that point.”</p>

Static Variables	What Participants Said
Political Support	<p>“And I think just kind of after that whole time period, it’s really that’s what did it, is the confluence of all those factors, but really just this feeling of like, the department doesn’t, I mean, some of the people there care if I’m healthy, but the department doesn’t care if I’m healthy.”</p> <p>“Officers were vilified by the media and state politicians”. “No truth by politicians and media on any cases.”</p> <p>“Every critical incident that we have in an [urban] or [rural] area has the potential to blow up based on political backing.”</p> <p>“There doesn’t seem to be a truth being spoken by the politicians.”</p> <p>“You would be called down there by the governor and deployed down there, and then you’d watch the nightly news, and then basically [they’re] there throwing law enforcement under the bus.”</p>
Community Support	<p>“I think there are definitely other states that are probably a better working environment for officers where they have backing from their state politicians.”</p> <p>“I felt like I was a punching bag for [them].”</p> <p>“Police officers are being shot in their squad cars, or they’re not even on an incident. They’re being fired upon simply because they wear a uniform and sit in a squad car.”</p> <p>“You were harassed on every call you went to. That was still my experience in 2021. It was still this, reality. The community support was awful. It was awful.”</p> <p>“Well, you know we were getting our [explicative] hammered. Cops didn’t do anything right. They were shooting every black person that they saw. I have five life-saving medals, and four of those people are black. I never killed a black person in my life. But just because I wore the uniform, you know, people had this assumption.”</p>
Mental Health	<p>“The population of the United States hated cops.”</p> <p>“Just the thought of going into work was horrifying. I was living about an hour away from work at the time, and my commute took 45 minutes. I didn’t remember whatsoever. I would, once I got in or near [workplace], just, again, so having panic attacks, my heart rate would go up, anxiety would go up, my hands would start sweating and trembling.”</p>

Dynamic factors shifted considerably from top to bottom. The general observation from the narratives of these former law enforcement officers was that when the media turned its attention to its own observations of what LEOs state is not understandable by civilians, administrators, and politicians quickly moved to blame the profession and those within it. This, in turn, led to a lack of community support and, in some cases, the community turning against LE and LEOs. The static factors remained consistent, but it was after the community moved against LEOs that the mental health of officers decompensated. The symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and unproductive anxiety became acute on top of saturation. When it arose during interviews, officers reported that their administrations had denied the day off they had requested. During axial coding, this data was merged under and reconciled with the theme of “Administration Support”. Despite some of the more extreme experiences officers reported during their careers, this was evidently the breaking point. During the social unrest of May 2020 and the following months, the “community” had rescinded their support for LE and the LEOs within it.

### **After May 2020**

In the aftermath of the social unrest of May 2020, which participants renamed “the summer of love”, the exodus phenomenon started with reports that over 150 Minneapolis LEOs left the department for mental health injuries, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Associated Press, 2020). The phenomenon spread to other states (Pagones & Woodhouse, 2022) and the argument on causes began. What former LEOs in this study reported was that the media continued to cover the Floyd story, influencing police

administrations, politicians, and the community against the law enforcement officers who “serve at the will” of the communities they protect. The perceived and real lack of support from their administrations was reported as even being against them as they carried out their prescribed duties. One participant noted that “*politicians would rather have a dead cop*”. This sentiment, in various forms, was reflected in the narratives of all the LEOs in this study.

Table 9 highlights some of the quotes that stood out from the transcript coding that seemed to resonate with the other participants. Officers began to believe there was no other way but to leave the profession they loved, doing the things they thought they would do until retirement, and serving the communities they had chosen to serve. The experience of mental health symptoms ranged from general malaise to plans of death by suicide. What had not changed, however, were the static factors surrounding the stressors of the LE job and the experience of critical incidents. The stigma of receiving professional mental health services was still present. When the community rejected the LE profession, LEOs began to suffer the symptoms of their mental health issues acutely. This then led to the decision to leave the profession.

**Table 9***Participant Report of Their Condition After May 2020*

Static Variables	What Participants Said
Accumulation of Stressors	Same
Critical Incidences	Same
Therapy	“And then just for my own personal growth, I decided that I to start taking it seriously because I’m like, I don’t want to have these thoughts and all type of stuff for the rest of my life.”
Wellness	Same
Stigma	Same
Impact on Family	“Well, my wife says I’m a different person. I’m much more relaxed. I’ve lost quite a bit of weight. I am much less stressed, much less irritable.”
Dynamic Variables	
Media	
Administration Support	<p>“What essentially motivated me to leave was probably the lack of support that we felt from our, not just our admin, but even, you know, lieutenants, commanders, inspectors.”</p> <p>“I think, honestly, if I had had some support, even by our admin, I probably would have stayed.”</p> <p>“And that’s when I realized that it wasn’t the people I was dealing with who were making me feel that way, but instead it was essentially them. It was more the lack of support”.</p>
Political Support	<p>“It seemed like there was definitely some pressure by higher political characters to make us an example.”</p> <p>“The politicians would rather have a dead cop.”</p>
Community Support	<p>“They increasingly did things that put stress on their people to further the political agenda of the times.”</p> <p>“2020 just changed the character of the job almost entirely, overnight. It just isn’t there isn’t the support for that real law enforcement work, especially in a patrol capacity, in most communities, not all, but in most communities. It’s disjointed. Keep yourself out of trouble. Don’t you go out there proactively and aggressively do your job.”</p> <p>“It certainly got worse because we became evil to the public, and everybody hated us. It became more challenging to do my job, where I helped children; there was a sense that the [City] Police Department didn’t do any good for anybody.”</p>
Mental Health	<p>“It was stress from the community. You know, the second-guessing everything that’s been done in law enforcement, being hesitant to use force because of all I’ve seen, what happened with George Floyd, and what’s happened with other cops across the country.”</p> <p>“It was after the riots in 2020 that I was diagnosed with PTSD.”</p> <p>“I was just too far gone. I mean, I wouldn’t even be gone, it’s like, I was just, it was, how can I explain it? Like, I was just done. Like, when I left, I knew I was done. I wasn’t coming back.”</p>

Static Variables	What Participants Said
	“I was having nightmares consistently. I was having anxiety attacks. I wanted to kill myself.”

### **Limitations of the Study**

When developing this study, a question arose about where participants would come from and whether the sample would adequately represent the entire LE population in the US. Perspectives of persons of color in policing were not described in this study, as none came forward to participate. Researchers suggest that Black Americans are generally less likely to participate in research because of historical abuses by researchers, time, financial constraints, discomfort with sharing personal information, the race of the recruiter, and other members of their community discouraging their participation (Barrett et al., 2017). Nothing is said about how this may generalize to other Black LEOs or other persons of color. It is also noted that racial minorities in law enforcement account for 27 to 28% while the majority are still white (Peyton et al., 2022). Still, race in policing is different from their civilian counterparts as assuming the role of a LEO changes how individuals see race (Headley, 2022). However, researchers report that LEOs of color are leaving at the same rate as their White counterparts and for the same reasons, with the primary reason being a sense of skepticism and mistrust from the communities they serve (Headley, 2022). The sample size was very healthy, but the unfortunate outcome was turning people away because they did not meet the full inclusion criteria. Still, the group of study recruits who were not eligible for participation highlighted a population of LEOs not accounted for in other research: those recruited during the Clinton Crime Bill Era, which led to the recruitment of thousands of LEOs in the mid-to-late 1990s. Based on the

data in Figure 3, none of the participants in this study were from the pre-Crime Bill Era or Crime Bill Era. The Crime Bill Era recruit would be retiring or, more likely, close enough to retirement that they are more likely to lose pension benefits if they left early. Many of the LEOs who were turned away from participation in this study still took early retirement, which resulted in a penalty on their pensions. Nevertheless, with these two specific populations not represented in this study, the narrative was essentially the same.

I believe that the data gathered, coded, and reported in this manuscript meet the criteria for trustworthiness, allowing the hypothesis to be tested against other populations not represented in this sample of participants. Other limitations include that all the participants were White. If they were from more rural communities, they were representative of the communities they served; however, if they were from urban communities, they would be less representative of those communities. This is more of an issue with the recruitment process, but I did not account for these variables. Rural communities were generally more homogeneous and whiter than urban or suburban locations, which tended to be more diverse.

A notable limitation is that all participants came from one midwestern state, rather than the intended diversity. This is probably because the limitation originates from the researchers' lack of available networks in other states. For as much as the outreach preparing for this research included entities in other states where there was loss, I have not established myself as a trusted person in those geographical areas. Initially, the goal was to recruit participants from across the United States. When sending out the recruitment materials, only organizations that were familiar with me forwarded them. The LE profession is highly decentralized, even within counties, and in some cases, such as

larger cities in the US, by precincts. Even so, the same precinct could behave very differently from one shift to another in many jurisdictions. As noted by others, over the course of a LEO's career, they eventually come to believe that if another LEO is not their partner or part of their shift, that individual does not matter (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995; Manning & Manning, 1978). This is a significant limitation because it requires greater effort to secure the support of other trusted professionals, whether mental health providers, providers of different services, or LE-associated individuals. If a researcher has no "in" to this population, they may find it very difficult to conduct a qualitative study of it. A more robust research endeavor would also include those who retired but earlier than they expected, as well as those who stayed. It would be informative to understand what LEOs would say about why they took an earlier retirement and what led them to that. A simple modification to the interview tool used in this study would work. It would also be informative to hear from LEOs who stayed to understand the factors they possess or lack.

## **Recommendations**

### **Strengths of This Study**

Among the strengths of this study was the use of Classical Glaserian Grounded Theory versus Straussian Grounded Theory. The main difference between the two is that CGGT attempts to keep the interviewer as neutral as possible in the techniques used to interview, progressing from open coding to axial coding. Straussian is a more relativist approach where the interviewer's impact on the participants is also accounted for and coded. Memoing my reactions to participants' answers was essential to identifying potential biases in the following interviews. Despite the occasional moment, I remained

neutral to what participants said during the interviews, I attempted to keep my reactions to a minimum and focus on asking follow-up questions that required more details in areas where an outsider might not understand. For example, when participants would say things like “they abandoned us”, I would ask, “Could you please tell me specifically who ‘they’ are?” In brief, the recommendation is to encourage qualitative researchers to maintain a neutral stance.

The interview questionnaire (Appendix A) was edited multiple times to ensure that the questions flow. Feedback from the dissertation committee led to the development of a simple yet effective tool to maintain the flow of the interview and minimize the potential for interviewer bias. The interview questions were few, and they allowed for clarifying, probing, and follow-up questions that led to the development of a more complete picture of the participants’ sentiments. The themes easily arose from the answers. A sound interview script is essential for qualitative research studies. This tool can be easily applied to other studies of a similar nature.

Another strength was the recruitment of participants. As a trusted figure in the Midwest’s LE culture, it was easy to recruit from the region. In the limitations section following this portion of the manuscript, I will describe how this was also a limitation. Organizations that I reached out to, which had a more personal knowledge of me, were quick to forward the recruitment materials to those they knew might meet the criteria. Recruitment occurred faster than I could begin the interviews. By the time I conducted my first interview, over 15 participants had already been identified. To reach all qualified participants, I needed to extend the interview period by one week. Although 17 participants had been interviewed at that point, saturation had been achieved, coding for

10 participants was complete, and the study could have been closed. This was two weeks into the study period. As stated in earlier portions of this manuscript, 12 participants did not meet the exact criteria as was proposed before IRB approval. It was challenging to turn these participants down because, in the spirit of the requirements, they met what the study was looking for: reasons for leaving before anticipated retirement. Once again, two participants failed to respond to the interview options, and one participant did not attend their scheduled interview and did not respond to a follow-up email to reschedule.

The lens of grounded theory (GT) was helpful. Officers made comments about how, as stress increased, the pressure of doing their jobs in a specific way to stay “out of trouble” led to extraordinary behaviors. These behaviors include not responding to calls for fear of retribution and finding ways to avoid work. It was unanimous among all the participants that the profession they originally wanted to pursue was a calling. When the profession changed, maladaptive behaviors primarily caused by psychological health symptoms increased.

### **Recommendations**

A more robust study would have included other cities or areas, such as Atlanta, Buffalo, or Seattle, as examples. These cities were also cited as losing many officers during the mass exodus (Pagones, 2022; PERF, 2022; Woodhouse, 2023). Using the same recruitment strategies, such as approaching and networking with locally situated and respected providers, is highly recommended. This would ensure that the researcher is vetted. In some cases, it probably felt like I was “cold calling” or emailing organizations that have no knowledge or connection to the researcher.

Using the interview questionnaire was also a significant strength. The questions were vetted first through known LE acquaintances, then through the dissertation committee. The wording is essential, yielding responses that are both topic- and theme-filled. Collaboration is essential for creating tools like this interview guide. The questionnaire applies to the other areas affected by the loss of LEOs. A follow-up study that includes some of those different locations in the United States would be interesting, as it could identify other elements that were not found in this study.

The process, although seemingly complicated at first, was very fluid. The study moved quickly. The moment the initial email was sent, the social media posts were published, and responses from potential participants began. In fact, there was no need to post on all the planned sites initially, as interviews were scheduled for the very next day and throughout the week. Almost all the time in the first week was used to vet participants and schedule them for interviews. Twenty participants were expected to be interviewed within two weeks. The process of transcribing, reviewing transcripts, and coding was efficient and effective.

NVivo was especially helpful for coding. NVivo's transcription services were beneficial. Although I did not utilize the additional artificial intelligence (AI) services because they were not part of my original plan, I believe that future studies might be faster and easier with the use, but not reliance on, AI support from NVivo. AI exploded during the final period of preparing this research paper for defense, and I am not well-versed in its capabilities, but I am aware of its potential. It can be said that this paper was written in the traditional ways dissertations have been typed over the last 20 or so years. Given that I am not willing to try something new late in the process, I did not entertain

the idea; however, future research may very well incorporate this powerful tool if accepted academically.

Recommendations for future research on LEO retention and retirement should strive to include a more diverse participant pool across race, ethnicity, cultural, and geographic backgrounds. Division 18 of the American Psychological Association, which focuses on law enforcement and other first responders, could aid collaborative efforts to increase research at a national level. The PERF (2023) study was explicit about the lack of information on how many officers of color left the force, but it would be beneficial to determine if the impact was the same. What is known is that efforts to recruit officers for a more diverse police force have increased since May 2020 (Zaru & Negussie, 2025).

Another perspective for future research could also include the narratives of law enforcement officers who did not leave the profession. Asking officers what keeps them on the job and helps them get through the law enforcement profession's difficulties would be equally important. For as many officers who left the profession, thousands more stayed. This information may help overcome the problems experienced by those who might leave the profession. On this point, it would also be interesting to see if different geographical areas that did not experience exodus numbers of LEOs could yield valuable information.

One other recommendation is to represent the narratives of LEOs who retire early. In the cases of participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria, most of them were Clinton Crime Bill Era LEOs who lost compensation and pension by taking an earlier retirement. LEOs are still taking early retirement, but they were not included in this study because they technically retired and completed a law enforcement profession. In speaking

to this set of LEOs, it was evident that they may have left for many of the same reasons. There are already quantitative studies that depict the reasons for early retirement, but, through my literature review, no narrative studies were found.

## **Implications**

### **Impact on Positive Social Change**

This study's implications for social change are that it informs the fields of psychology and law enforcement on the issue of retention related to mental health injuries. This study's implication for social change is that it also informs areas that need more research, such as the narratives of LEOs who have not left after May 2020, before retirement. As leaders in mental health, law enforcement, communities, government, and other related fields, we must view problems as opportunities to impact our areas of service positively. I would argue that this is true at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, including the office of the mental health professional treating the LEO. We have "an ethical responsibility to take care of our finest citizens in our communities, which are our first responders" (League of Minnesota Cities, 2022). As leaders, we must view the problem of attrition as a leadership responsibility, rather than one that is passed down to individual LEOs when they are unable to continue in their job.

### ***Individual***

Psychologists and other mental health professionals have a unique opportunity to provide insight to the patient sitting in front of us, looking for answers and solutions to their problems. LEOs that come to us are often confused about how things came to be. As the participants in this study pointed out, there is a stigma around seeking therapy. Although things are changing with peer-to-peer programming, wellness programs, and

contracting with mental health agencies for ongoing support, when a LEO finally decides to get into therapy, they often believe they have exhausted all other resources. MHPs are frequently their last resort. The MHP treating the LEO must possess a foundational understanding that the genesis of many of the problems they encounter is the same as that of any other person: they are struggling with how they belong in our communities (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Understanding that societal perspectives of the day can be a strong indicator of how individuals feel is an essential aspect of therapy that dates to work of Freud, Jung, Adler, and others (Adler, 1956).

### ***Family***

An essential aspect of belonging to a community is how officers define the concept of “family.” To LEOs, family is your LE family and your biological family, and both are LEO’s greatest resources (Castellano, 2025). Familial support, as in their non-LE family, is crucial to their decision to stay or leave. An officer leaves their job and goes home to a family that is watching the news, following Facebook groups of spouses, listening to the rhetoric at their children’s schools concerning the LE profession, and managing a household while anticipating the return of their loved one: the LEO. LEO families serve together, and when there is suffering within this family system, the LEO suffers on the job just like any other family member. The difference is that in these families, there is a significantly higher level of stress that, if ignored, can lead to higher rates of family conflict and eventually divorce (Zemlock, 2022). Inquiring about this fundamental support system is crucial.

The second family that LEOs endorse is their law enforcement family. Peers are crucial in the sense of belonging and feelings of support. In this study, I found that half of

the participants reported that their peers were supportive of their decision to leave the profession, and the other half were not. Peers were reported as seeing leaving over a mental health diagnosis as “quitting” and “taking the easy way out”. Most participants in this study reported that it was one of the most complex decisions they had ever made in their lives, and although they may not miss all aspects of the job, they did miss their partners. When a LEO decides to leave the profession, the MHP needs to inquire about their LEO family. The MHP also has a unique position to reiterate to CLEOs what they likely already know and help create more supportive work environments, even during difficult, career-changing situations. When a military service member leaves the military with honor, they are usually publicly farewelled and presented with their last awards. A salute is rendered as the highest form of honor and respect amongst those who serve in a uniform (U.S. Department of the Army, 2025). They leave and are regarded as a “veteran” of that profession. When a LEO leaves, they are often forgotten and spoken about in the past tense. An MHP can help change that specific aspect of LEO culture.

### ***Organizational***

There was once a negative perspective on MH consulting to LE (Greenstone, 2023), and for good reason. What MHPs lacked was a cultural understanding of LE’s work and the responsibility that CLEOs bear for the decisions they make. LE administrations/administrators were viewed as “disconnected” from their LEOs in this study. Even lower-level administrators depicted higher echelon administrators as “out of touch” with what is happening with their LEOs “on the ground”. The MHP needs to be careful in how they present data to the command staff. They must balance the trust between the CLEO and the LEO while being a resource to both. Studies show that

complaining does not change policies; in fact, it makes things worse (Kowalewski, 2019; Loper, 2019). Helping CLEOs understand what the complaint might mean or leverage the psychological value behind it could help them connect with their LEOs in a more meaningful, supportive way. In the US Army, we would often say to be more watchful of the soldiers who have stopped complaining because they are no longer invested in staying in the Army. The same could be said with LE. Retention is a leadership issue; trained and well-versed MHPs can serve as command multipliers.

### ***Societal/Policy***

At the mezzo and macro levels, an MHP can reinforce initiatives that appropriately support the mission to retain LEOs. No participant in this study said that there is no need for reform in policing. I would add that there is a need for continuous reform in almost any profession to some extent or another. The discipline of psychology is still, in some cases, seen as a gatekeeper to LEOs and a potential threat to their jobs. There are training programs designed to enhance MHPs' understanding of how they respond to first responders. Not enough MHPs are making the effort to become trained in this culture. Although being culturally responsive is an ethical responsibility (American Psychological Association, 2020; Bernal et al., 2009), among LEOs, MHPs tend to hide behind their own prejudices and biases (Otto & Gatens, 2022; Gavin & Porter, 2025; Robb-Dover, 2023).

I was asked in an interview with my agency to take on a contract with an LE agency by a "community member" about how our practice would bring the voice of the community into therapy sessions (Anonymous, 2024). This question would not be asked if the culture being served was military, person of color, criminal background, or how the

patient represents themselves by gender or sexual preference. One provider's response to the community member was that the community has no place in the therapy session. In contrast, another provider stated that they themselves are a member of the community. The point is that there is a greater need for social education regarding what culture is, regardless of one's chosen profession. MHPs can serve as a conduit to promote the understanding that LE culture is, in fact, culture. Notably, I must also mention that culture is not a protective factor against non-adaptive or maladaptive behavior. All cultures have their pros and cons. The psychological profession has established ethics and codes to ensure that past boundary crossings are not repeated. In this case, regarding police culture, the MHP can serve as a voice or a reason in a hostile environment.

Psychological health and wellness programs for LEOs also need to develop expectations management and skills development to help officers navigate the various aspects of their profession (Department of Justice, 2023). Whereas the two paragraphs above address external factors that affect LEOs, more attention needs to be paid to internal factors that promote psychological health. Beginning at the academy level through skills training, and into the different echelons of law enforcement, there needs to be an ongoing conversation about changing the culture of law enforcement as it pertains to retention and the psychological well-being of the LE family.

### **Methodological Implications**

The insights gained from this study underscore the importance of a collaborative approach to collecting data across the nation. One researcher from a particular area may have connections and earned the trust of LEOs in their region, but that does not necessarily transfer to others in the US. To strengthen this, a team of researchers, each

representing their respective areas of influence, can yield a more thorough perspective.

The American Psychological Association has a Division 18: Police and Public Safety Section, which can serve as a leader in advancing the potential of this research. This also highlights the potential impact of a researcher who has earned the trust of their region's LE agencies and their officers. The use of a standard interview guide was also helpful. An agreement amongst researchers on the questions and their applicability to their regions' LE agencies needs to be established.

### **Theoretical Implications**

To mitigate potential bias among multiple raters, I suggest advanced training in CGGT. While reading about this theory's approach to data collection and coding, there was an abundance of material to cover. CGGT is more than grounded theory; it is a disciplined approach towards a more scientific method in qualitative research (provide citation). Straussian Grounded Theory is another powerful methodological approach; however, if the researcher is already a trusted influence in their region, this reduces the potential for trustworthiness, as the researcher must also code their interactions with participants and how these interactions may have impacted the responses. I found that CGGT, in a disciplined manner, reduced the potential for influencing the participant, who was already aware of the interviewer by reputation in their region. The goal of CGGT is to remove the interviewer as a variable that affects how respondents behave and answer questions. By reviewing the audio recordings and transcripts, I was stoic in my interview style, and the responses appeared to be more personal to the participant, rather than looking for my feedback.

All the researchers involved would also need to understand GT and its lens towards the ultimate nonadaptive behavior of leaving the profession entirely. When a population or culture is stressed, it tends to exhibit maladaptive and non-adaptive behaviors to gain resources or avoid consequences (Agnew, 2018; Bishopp et al., 2019; Brezina, 2017; Moon & Jonson, 2012; Swatt et al., 2007). Mourtgos et al. (2020) noted that quitting the profession is the final avoidance behavior LEOs employ to avoid the pressure of the job or the consequences of being proactive in policing. GT has its place in understanding not just criminal behavior, as it was used in its foundational research, but also in how it is applied to how any profession experiencing difficulties may react to pressures when the locus of control is externalized.

### **Empirical Implications**

Beyond the results of this study, the implications for a healthier LE force through culturally responsive mental health treatments, the impact on families and their longevity within LE frameworks, the potential for CLEO support, and policy changes at higher levels can be instrumental in changing community support. I heard from LEO participants that when they lost their sense of community support, they turned towards the antecedents of how their leaders reacted to media pressures. By changing perspectives in all these areas, offering psychological insights into messaging, the packaging of wellness incentives, and effectively describing the condition of the LEO ranks, we can reduce the early exodus of LEOs. Most importantly, we can humanize the profession of LE and reinstate the LEO in their communities.

## **Recommendations for Practice**

At the direct practice level for MHPs, understanding how our profession, as part of the community in general, has in the past impacted and alienated LE from seeking our services and allowing that to influence future service provision positively is critical. In many jurisdictions in the nation, before assuming a position as a LEO, candidates come to a psychologist to be evaluated for fitness to the profession. We trust our opinion of a potential candidate. This process has been abused, with some colleagues coaching candidates on how to answer questions on standardized assessments or allowing them to retake assessments within an inappropriate amount of time. Our profession is also trusted to make recommendations on the fitness for duty of LEOs who may have engaged in actions that raise questions about their abilities. As part of the community, we can influence how LEOs perceive our profession, thereby increasing trust that we are genuinely interested in LEOs' well-being and the profession's well-being. To achieve this, we must continue to expand our understanding of the LEO profession and become culturally responsive to the entire profession and its members, including their families.

At the CLEO level, considering that it is not the LEO who is failing the profession, but rather that we, as leaders, could be failing the LEO, represents a paradigm shift that may be difficult to embrace. The most successful military leaders and leaders in the LE profession embrace the difficulty of protecting their subordinates from the unfair practices of uncontrollable powers that directly affect the LEO. Participants commented that "words are important," and it is not just what a leader says, but also what they fail to say. Showing the community that CLEOs support both the community and the LEO as members of the community is a powerful and courageous message.

At the macro level, or governmental level, blaming an entire profession for appeasing a constituency results in millions of dollars in attrition losses for workers' compensation claims. We observe an increase in the loss of experience on the force, a rise in crime, a buildup of stress in other agencies that must fill the gaps, and an escalation of physical and psychological harm to those who enforce our policies and laws (Adams et al., 2023). Community is not an "us versus them," and leadership has a direct impact on the motivations of officers to leave the profession when they perceive we are against them. The community does not know what it does not know, and when it loses trust in LE, it turns on LEOs and ultimately pays the price.

As researchers, we have a responsibility to ensure that the knowledge we acquire is conveyed with integrity and respect for all those involved. Research can inform people about practices at every level. Scholar-practitioners have a unique position in both research and practice, enabling them to implement change grounded in empirical research findings. As a community of mental health professionals, we need to move beyond reading abstracts and conclusions and instead read what researchers are doing and saying. Every MHP needs to transition from just practicing to becoming a scholar in their area of interest.

### **Conclusion**

One rendition of the genesis of the term "the thin blue line," which identifies the law enforcement profession, dates to Valley Forge with General George Washington (Ruppert, 2014). The story goes that General Washington asked for the best soldier from every company to be identified to "police the line". The blue line was the Continental Army, known for its blue uniform. The best soldier from each company was designated

to join the newly created predecessor to the modern-day Military Police Corps, known as the Marechaussee Corps, commanded by Captain Bartholemew von Heer (Rupper, 2014). It was also at Valley Forge that the Prussian officer and consultant, Baron Von Steuben, suggested that every man who deserted and returned be fired at the stake to make an example of them. Upon consulting with the Military Police officers, General Washington learned that the men who allegedly deserted were, in fact, going home to take care of their families, harvest their crops, mend their uniforms, obtain more ammunition, and acquire another rifle, among other things. The fact was that they returned to fight. It was then that General George Washington referred to a quote from a letter he wrote in 1775 to quell the Continental Congress that he would not use the Army to usurp the newly founded country's government. In response to Baron Von Steuben's request to fire the men at the stake, General Washington reiterated what he said in that letter when he said, "*when we assumed the soldier, we did not lay aside the citizen*" (Washington, 1775).

The development of the LE profession over time has undergone multiple challenges and reforms. We now have one of the most sophisticated LE systems in the world with some of the most highly trained and adaptable LEOs we have seen. The myths of old continue to return. We cannot control the media. We can influence politicians and policymakers. We can enhance the profession by providing empirically supported evidence to CLEOs on evidence-based practices for retaining officers, and we can directly support the citizens who take it upon themselves to police our communities for their own safety. In the research presented, the citizen officer has spoken, and they hope that we do not forget them as we endeavor to create a safer society. We, as researchers,

leaders, and MHPs, have a unique role and responsibility to play in ensuring this does not happen.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol Sheet

**Participant ID:****General Information**

Date hired: \_\_\_\_\_

Law enforcement agency where the participant worked when they left law enforcement:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

When the participant completed skills training or the academy: \_\_\_\_\_

When they left law enforcement: \_\_\_\_\_

**Inclusion Criteria**

Did the officer leave the job of law enforcement before retirement? Yes/No

Did the officer leave the law enforcement job after May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020? Yes/No**Interview Questions**

1. What motivated you to leave your position?
2. Is there anything that could have been done to retain you?
3. If you know of other officers leaving the force for reasons other than retirement, what was their reason for leaving? Based on your reasons for leaving, how would you compare your reasons to others?
4. How would you describe your mental wellness before, during, and after May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020?
5. What would have helped you maintain resiliency while deciding whether to stay or leave the profession?

6. What has your experience been about your decision since leaving the profession?
7. Now that you have been out of law enforcement for X, what are your thoughts about your decision?
8. Rather than leaving the employment of police, did you ever consider working in another department within your force? If yes, what thoughts were those, and if not, why do you think you did not consider this option?

## Appendix B: Participant Screening Form

The following questions were used to screen participants to ensure they are appropriate for the study and that no ethical procedures are violated.

1. How did you hear about this study? This question can produce potential conflicts of interest and the potential that the participant already knows the investigator.

Stop: If there is a potential conflict of interest with the participant, who is somehow associated with the investigator.

Go: Continue to question #2 if there is no conflict of interest.

2. Did you completely leave the profession after May 2020 and before retirement?

Stop: If the participant is currently working in law enforcement.

Go: Continue to the next question if they left the profession entirely.

3. Do you have any connections with the investigator or coworkers and or colleagues of the investigator? This question is like question #1 but rephrased to ensure no connection between the investigator and the participant.

Stop: If the participant mentions some connection beyond hearing about the study or the investigator's reputation.

Go: Continue to informed consent.

## Appendix C: Email Invitation Template

**Subject line:**

Research Study Seeking Former Police Officers to Tell Their Story – Help Inform the Public

**Email message:**

There is a new study about the experiences of police officers who left law enforcement after 2020 and before retirement that could help policymakers, leaders, and care providers better understand and help identify the reasons law enforcement officers left the field. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences and why you left law enforcement before retirement.

**About the study:**

- One 60-minute online, in-person, or phone interview will be audio recorded.
- You would be helping get the voices of law enforcement officers out to contribute to officer wellness.
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details identifying you.

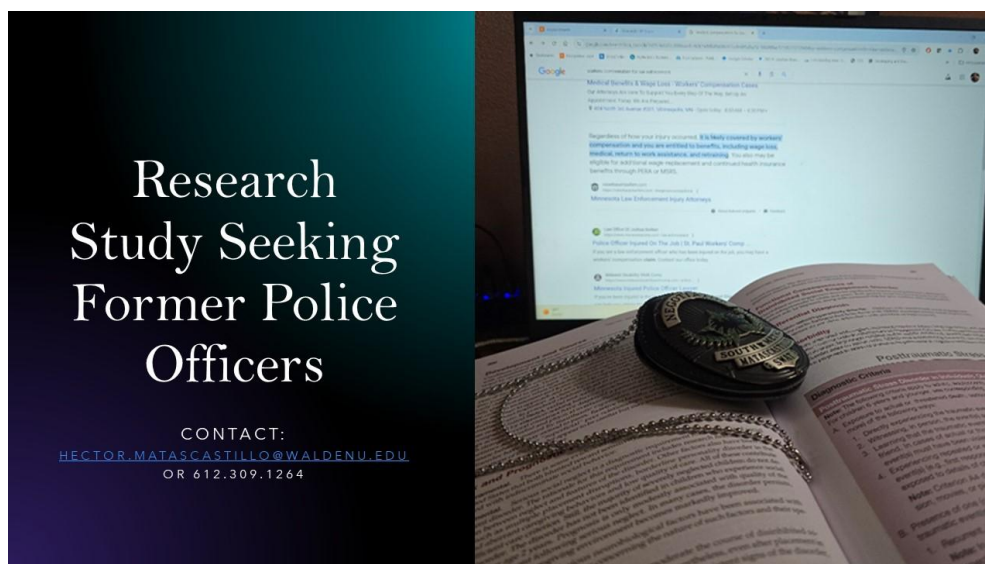
**This study seeks 20 volunteers who were officers who have left:**

- the law enforcement job before retirement,
- the law enforcement job after May 25, 2020.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Hector R. Matascastillo, MSW, LICSW, a doctoral student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during July-August 2025. The IRB approval number is 06-25-25-1015187.

Please privately message [hector.matascastillo@waldenu.edu](mailto:hector.matascastillo@waldenu.edu) or 612.309.1264 to let them know of your interest.

## Appendix D: Social Media Invitation Template



There is a new study about the experiences of police officers who left law enforcement after 2020 and before retirement that could help policymakers, leaders, and care providers better understand and help identify the reasons law enforcement officers left the field. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences and why you left law enforcement before retirement.

### **About the study:**

- One 60-minute online, in-person, or phone interview will be audio recorded.
- You would be helping get the voices of law enforcement officers out to contribute to officer wellness.
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details identifying you.

### **This study seeks 20 volunteers who are officers who have left:**

- the law enforcement job before retirement,
- the law enforcement job after May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Hector R. Matascastillo, MSW, LICSW, a doctoral student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during July-August 2025. The IRB approval number is 06-25-25-1015187.

Please privately message [hector.matascastillo@waldenu.edu](mailto:hector.matascastillo@waldenu.edu) or 612.309.1264 to let them know of your interest.

## Appendix E: Checklist: Participant Selection and Participant and Data Processing

1. The investigator emails contacts and posts the study to Kajabi, LinkedIn, Meta, Craigslist, etc. to recruit participants.
2. The participant receives information about the study.
3. The participant contacts the researcher by phone or email.
4. The researcher contacts the participants for screening, using Appendix C.
5. If not selected, thank the volunteers and invite them to future presentations.
6. If selected, the researcher schedules them and sends a Teams invite with the location.
7. Participants chose whether they prefer an online or in-person interview.
8. The digital audio recorder is turned on.
9. A transcript of the interview is created.
10. The audio recorder data are uploaded into NVivo and coding begins.
11. The data is backed up to an external hard drive.
12. The transcript is sent to the participant for review.
13. If the transcript is accurate, the participant is told that they may be invited back for a follow-up or that the study is over. If the transcript is inaccurate, the participant was offered a follow-up interview to correct inaccuracies. Once the transcript is accurate, the participant was informed that they may be invited back for a follow-up or that the study is over.
14. Discern through coding if follow-up is needed.
15. The participant is called back and is offered a follow-up interview or to exit the study
16. The participant exits the study.

17. Thank the volunteers and invite them to future presentations.

18. After completion, at the appropriate time, conduct the public presentation.

**While the steps above are happening, the steps below are also progressing.**

1. Coding in NVivo continues until saturation occurs.

2. Saturation occurs. The study ends.

3. Chapters 4 and 5 are written.

4. After completion, at the appropriate time, conduct the public presentation.

Appendix F: NVivo Raw Data of Participant Transcripts – Open Coding Report

Coding Summary by Code  
LEO Narratives Pre-Retirement Study  
8/17/2025 1:57 PM

Aggregate	Classification	Coverage	Number Of Coding References	Reference Number	Coded By Initials	Modified On
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Code

Codes\\Administration

Document

Files\\3.694.WAV – Coded

No 0.0820 4

1 HRM 8/2/2025 4:36 PM

We are not going to remove your badge and your gun if you do. If you have an issue, even if it's a bad one, like we'd rather help you get your life back on track than you worry about losing your badge.

2 HRM 8/2/2025 4:36 PM

if you don't want to lose numbers, I mean, 're having a hard enough time getting new new people in right like focus on the guys you have guys and gals you have try to keep them in the uniform rather than you know Focusing too much on getting new recruits, right? Like if you get good recruits I believe that you will get people that want to work for an agency. So Spend the time and resources to let your guys know that you

0:19:25

(Speaker 1)

care about them here and now. And that means showing your support of your peer support groups, your retained clinicians that are speaking with your agencies, things of that nature. I was fortunate enough to speak with a number of high-ranking people and one of their biggest

3 HRM 8/2/2025 4:36 PM

do the legwork now before they have the incident or before they go out on PTSD so that they know that if a peer support member reaches out to you, they are, by extension, a weapon of the chief or the sheriff to speak to them

4 HRM 8/2/2025 4:36 PM

They were senior officers that finally just had to leave, like, off PTSD out, right? And like after years of separation,

0:21:07

(Speaker 1)

they were like talking to this high-ranking person, you know, offline and they're like, hey, where the hell were you? They're like, I'm the one that sent the people to you, you know, like the peer support, the resources, right?

Files\\4.234.WAV – Coded

No 0.0557 11

1 HRM 8/2/2025 4:36 PM

a three-legged stool with we've got your department leadership

2 HRM 8/2/2025 4:36 PM

I think I think good leadership

Formatted Reports\\Coding Summary by Code Formatted Report

Page 1 of 61  
8/17/2025 1:57 PM

Aggregate	Classification	Coverage	Number Of Coding References	Reference Number	Coded By Initials	Modified On
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3 HRM 8/2/2025 4:46 PM

I have known other officers that have left from other agencies early and it's basically you don't feel valued. And there's several examples of that. And how do you keep law enforcement officers is they're willing to do the job and they're willing to put themselves in harm's way, but they want to feel valued. It's my department and other departments,

0:12:29

(Speaker 1)

they're not putting a value on their officers by the way they're reacting.

4 HRM 8/2/2025 4:47 PM

they've seen different chiefs at that time

5 HRM 8/2/2025 4:47 PM

And like our department, they tell you that they're going to give you one, and then they don't.

6 HRM 8/2/2025 4:48 PM

I asked every single one of them, were you offered and did you take an exit interview? Every single one of them said they were not giving an exit interview.

7 HRM 8/2/2025 4:49 PM

they're just letting you go out the door like they don't really care on what you what your thoughts are and I think they're really missing out

8 HRM 8/2/2025 4:50 PM

And I think that makes that I mean that's a

0:15:37

(Speaker 1)

very profound statement to an officer that gives you know 25-30 years of theirtheir life in a profession and at the end of it, the department doesn't want to hear from you. Your opinions are not valued. And that's what that tells the officers, that your service here was not valued.

9 HRM 8/2/2025 4:51 PM

You just don't feel like they want to hear from you. They just want to want to cover their bases and not not and we'd get hounded respond to this in

10 HRM 8/2/2025 5:07 PM

in our division that was for the positive as far as fixing these issues that have made the job more difficult.

11 HRM 8/2/2025 5:07 PM

and and a little better

0:30:34

(Speaker 1)

leadership within the departments,

Files\4.250.WAV – Coded

No 0.0205 3

1 HRM 8/4/2025 3:27 PM

on how upper-level administration could have supported cops that would have been hugely beneficial.

2 HRM 8/4/2025 3:29 PM

Admin

Aggregate	Classification	Coverage	Number Of Coding References	Reference Number	Coded By Initials	Modified On
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3 HRM 8/4/2025 3:30 PM

would say most of them left just because they were feeling so unsupported. They didn't feel like there was any morale or consistency or support.

**Files\4.463.WAV – Coded**

No 0.0626 4

1 HRM 8/4/2025 3:18 PM

You know, you could trust your immediate supervisors for the most part. I would say a good 85% of immediate supervisors were in support of their officers. Anything above that, I wouldn't have trusted.

2 HRM 8/4/2025 3:19 PM

and the administration was disgusting

3 HRM 8/4/2025 3:20 PM

they were just purposely trying to dig up dirt on every cop on the department that they could. It didn't matter. It didn't matter to what extent it was.

0:06:12

(Speaker 1)

They were just going through every one of them, every single complaint, and they were handing out days off, time off. And they had it out for all the cops. They were gonna, you know, given a chance, they were just gonna try to hang everybody, which seemed like to me.

4 HRM 8/4/2025 3:20 PM

and of course the chief of police and all of the deputy commanders.

**Files\4.768.WAV – Coded**

No 0.0747 10

1 HRM 8/4/2025 3:50 PM

The way that agency and a couple of key people there

0:03:53

(Speaker 1)

treated me and sort of supported me after those incidents in quick succession probably made the difference in why I stayed in law enforcement

2 HRM 8/4/2025 3:50 PM

But the support and sort of the way I was treated and supported by the chief deputy at the time and a couple other key people in that agency really, it retained me through that.

3 HRM 8/4/2025 3:52 PM

You know, I had talked to my bosses about, hey, you know, I need I need to not get some cases for a couple months and catch up. They did that for a while, which was great. The second that time ended I got three cases assigned in a week It's consistent like that for most people in the unit

4 HRM 8/4/2025 3:54 PM

There are things like, you know, the agency is required to pay for

0:10:51

(Speaker 1)

whatever health insurance doesn't cover of my treatments. They're refusing to