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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Kareem C. Puranda

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Review Committee
Dr. Kristin Dailey, Committee Chairperson,
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. Victoria Landu-Adams, Committee Member,
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. Lydia Forsythe, University Reviewer,
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

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

Walden University
2022

Abstract

Beliefs, Skill Sets, and Behaviors of Police Officers Regarding Mental Health Treatment

by

Kareem C. Puranda

MA, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2014

BS, Livingstone College, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

November 2022

Abstract

Current law enforcement training assumes that police officers can manage their mental health with minimal support. This cultural attitude creates a fear of being unfit if police officers seek assistance for their mental health. Law enforcement suicide rates have outnumbered duty-related deaths in recent years. Statistics show that police officers are twice as likely to die by suicide for reasons related to stress. Mental health treatment is the ideal solution, but research has shown that police officers often reject treatment due to stigma. This qualitative study aimed to examine factors that hindered law enforcement officers from obtaining mental health treatment. The Lazarus theory of stress and coping served as the theoretical foundation to help understand the cognitive process of stress appraisal and positive coping. This study recruited 12 sworn law enforcement officials from the South-Central region of North Carolina. The study used a qualitative research design with semistructured interviews that allowed participants to share their experiences and unique perspectives on mental health. Braun and Clarke's methodology helped to form the thematic analysis. Several subthemes emerged that pointed to a significant distrust for the departmental leadership. Participants feared that the request for mental health support would be used against them and subsequently compromise their employment. Findings provided valuable insight into the induced stress created by para-military training practices. The study will assist decision makers in positive social change through developing policies and training that offer more mental health resources for law enforcement professionals.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Charmaine Wilson, my wife, Nalo, my son's Elijah, Amari, and Amir. Mom, thank you for teaching me the value of hard work. I used those lessons to get through this process. To Nalo, your support has been the driving force that encouraged me to push through this rigorous process. You made this season of our lives manageable because of your patience, understanding, and love. "When I get my doctorate" was the catch phrase that kept both of us focused. Elijah, Amir, and Amari, I sacrificed so much time with all of you to work on this dissertation. I promise to make it up and continue the commitment of giving you more than I had. I know all of you understand the significance of this work. I hope I have been a great example of manhood to each of you in the way my mom showed me the qualities of what it means to be an amazing human being.

I also would like to dedicate this dissertation to every man and woman in blue that has ever suffered in silence and completed suicide before seeking treatment. I also dedicate this study to every underserved child or emotionally wounded person who felt like they had no other option but to live their life according to their emotional pain. I completed this study to demystify the paralyzing stigmas relating to mental health and advocate that people on both sides of the badge are more alike than they are different.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my dissertation committee for all their help throughout this journey. My previous chairperson Dr. Susan Baer and her awesome replacement Dr. Kristin Lee Dailey who provided amazing guidance and support throughout the latter part of this process. I want to acknowledge my second committee member Dr. Victoria Landu-Adams who stepped up without hesitation and answered the call to support this study. My University Research Reviewer, Lydia Forsythe; I appreciate all that you've done and for providing feedback throughout the entire process. Your support made this possible.

I also would like to thank Trev, Michael, Steve, Lori, Julius, Kim, Brian, Trina, Dentavious, my extended family, ASOP and STCC staff, business partnerships and my clients for affirming my gifts while working toward my doctorate. I will always be grateful for your support.

I would like to acknowledge the law enforcement officers in our country for your dedication and service. Despite the many challenges you've faced, you still show up and do the thankless job of protecting and serving.

Lastly, I would like to thank the volunteers in my study. You've contributed to a piece of history. Your contribution will hopefully make a difference and bring awareness to the type of support and interventions that law enforcement agencies need to provide their personnel.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The study aims to understand the beliefs of police officers regarding obtaining mental health treatment. Law enforcement officers are expected to handle problems that members of the community would rather avoid. These everyday problem solvers have a tough job and are left alone to deal with the stress that comes with the role (Stanley et al., 2016). The current law enforcement training insinuates that police officers can handle all the rigors faced on the job (Blumberg et al., 2019). Seeking help when you are expected to provide it questions an officer's fitness for duty. Within recent years, law enforcement has been under attack by its critics including those who hold political offices and members of the community (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). Physical tactics and legality are the most emphasized parts of law enforcement training, and minimal focus is placed on stress management and wellness (Blumberg et al., 2019).

According to Thoen et al. (2020), police officers are twice as likely to die by suicide for reasons related to stress. Law enforcement is a high-stress occupation that takes a toll on the mind of individuals who are expected to be tough enough to handle it (Violanti et al., 2019). Understanding and supporting the needs of police officers is essential to their quality of life (Stanley et al., 2016) so they can remain mentally and emotionally fit for the citizens they serve. Previously, researchers have shown that police officers respond well to training that addresses mental health concerns, such as suicide and wellness (McDevitt, 2020). I am conducting this study to identify the factors that prevent police officers from obtaining mental health treatment.

This chapter contains sections including Background, Problem Statement, Purpose of the Study, Research question, Theoretical Framework, Nature of the study, Definitions, Assumptions, Scope and Delimitations, Limitations, Significance, and Summary.

Background

The American law enforcement profession manifested from the Peelian framework created in England by Sir Robert Peele (Adegbile, 2017). This framework hinges upon the approval of the public, willing collaboration, the practice of equality, and other tenets that prioritize public approval of tactics being used (Adegbile, 2017). This framework has laid the foundation for the stakeholder relationships that impact the way police officers perform their duties (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). Public criticism is a stress factor that law enforcement administrators desire to avoid (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). Researchers have shown that organizational leadership style and structure have a significant impact on the way police officers do their jobs and how they interact with their management (Adegbile, 2017; Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). Poor relationships between frontline police officers and upper management can lead to negative feelings about the work environment and mental illness.

Gutshall et al. (2017) conducted a pilot study that assessed how occupational stress impacted work performance and working memory. This study was important because it highlighted the occupational stressors that officers contend with, yet they do not have the psychological tools to cope properly. The researchers surveyed 35 officers with 1-20 years of experience from the Southeast region of the United States. Twenty-

five participants completed six surveys and a memory test. Their test results revealed that stress over a week-long process does not have as much of an impact as anticipated. However, the working memory of police officers was impaired. The study found that over 10 days of cognitive functioning, processing information, learning, and working memory required improvement. The authors noted limitations to this study where the sample was not a significant size. It may have required a longer process, and officers were concerned about confidentiality.

The limitations experienced in the previous study are consistent with why the management of stress within the law enforcement profession is limited. Karaffa and Koch (2016) highlighted the public and personal stigmas police officers have toward seeking mental health services. The purpose of the study was to identify how the two types of stigmas predicted law enforcement outlook on seeking mental health services and improve awareness of pluralistic ignorance. According to Karaffa and Koch (2016) pluralistic ignorance is the rejection of actions, emotions, or ideas that are not favored publicly yet are privately desired by an individual in a group. Pluralistic ignorance can create inferiority, embarrassment, or ego mentality if individuals feel that their beliefs are inconsistent with the majority (Karaffa & Koch, 2016).

The researchers conducted a study of 248 police officers from a diversified level of law enforcement agencies ranging from municipal, state, and campus police in Texas and Oklahoma. The sample was predominantly male, with a median age of 42 years old and an average of 17 years of experience. The researchers collected data with an online survey consisting of 62 items regarding various considerations about seeking mental

health services. The study revealed that the concerns about public perception toward seeking help negatively impacted police officer perceptions. The researchers noted that officers who have sought services prior to the study had more positive perspectives than those who were mandated or never pursued treatment. Karaffa and Koch (2016) concluded that the assistance of mental health professionals who understand the nature of police work may help reduce the stigma if more education was brought forth on the benefits of counseling.

Stress has the potential to become a distraction from a police officer's well-being. Keech et al. (2020) examined the methods by which stress attitudes impact well-being and happiness in police officers. The researchers dubbed this the stress mindset, which can be either positive or negative. Keech et al. stated that the stress belief's model encompasses a mindset which changes physiological and behavioral responses when stress is present. The study contained a sample of 134 officers ranging from ages 25-59 years old. The sample consisted of more male than female officers from a single police district in Australia with a range of 1-41 years of experience. The Bayesian path analysis was used to interpret results. The findings of this study support that proactive preparation for job-related stress mitigated adverse coping.

Researchers have shown that there is a linkage between mental illness and suicide. Too et al. (2019) performed a meta-analysis using eight reputable health databases that contained records of people who have completed suicide. A focal point of the study was to identify which mental illnesses could be linked to suicide. The researchers found 20 articles that represented 13 unique studies. The researchers found

that mood, personality, and psychotic disorders are strongly connected to suicidality. The researchers highlighted the biogenetic vulnerability and negative life events as dominant factors that create a relationship between mental illness and suicide. Too et al. stressed the importance of addressing mental illnesses that can be treated before it leads to suicide.

Violanti et al. (2019) reviewed suicide rates between 1997-2016. The researchers utilized the PRISMA systematic review method to review 44 peer-reviewed articles and provide an approach to suicide prevention strategies. The researchers indicated that a multitude of approaches had been used to classify police suicide. Violanti et al. indicated that identifying authentic suicidal ideation among police officers might be difficult because of the hesitation to express a need for therapeutic help. The other challenge is law enforcement suicide is either underreported or misclassified. The researchers identified correlates between ideation and suicide completion as well as other mental health disorders. They discussed several risk factors that serve as indicators for recommended intervention that may lead to suicide prevention.

Thoen et al. (2020) conducted a study that examined officer perspectives on the prevention of suicide and wellness services. The researchers collected data on the types of wellness and suicide prevention programs currently used by law enforcement agencies and police officer's perception of these programs. The researchers utilized a stratified sample to collect national data on local and sheriff department programming. The sample contained 135 agencies, of which only 11 participated. Graduate students conducted semistructured telephone interviews. The results shared that six agencies did not have a

wellness program. The employee assistance program was the most notable prevention program available to police officers. The study discussed other specialized programs and training such as resilience, wellness campaigns, peer support, and critical incident response teams. The researchers noted that these programs were not identified as effective by the volunteers, and most of the mental health services were provided on a reactionary basis.

Tuttle et al. (2018) evaluated the relationship between work-related stress and personal relationships among police officers. The authors sampled 4,400 officers, only 1,632 responded to police officer questionnaires. These officers were from the Northeast, Midwest, and Southwest regions of the United States. Men made up 91% of the study and the average age was 39 years, with a mean of 14 years of work experience. The researchers found that career challenges negatively impacted marital relations. The same challenges impacted the officer's mental wellness. The authors suggested that wellness programs should also include family support.

Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) reviewed research on law enforcement mental illness and reasons why mental health services are not sought. The researchers utilized multiple academic databases to identify studies that focused on mental health concerns in the law enforcement profession. They validated that job-related stressors lead to depression and other mental health concerns and maladaptive coping. Velazquez and Hernandez pointed to the culture of law enforcement as a barrier to seeking help. Though limited research has been conducted on the stigma police officers have toward treatment, the researchers found officers are least likely to seek help because of the negative outlook

attached to mental health services. The authors mentioned intervention programs that are available to the officers.

Wheeler et al. (2018) discussed the stigmas of mental health treatment among police officers and the public's perception of police officers obtaining treatment. The researchers used an online survey tool to collect data from 168 participants. There were more female participants than males who ranged from ages 18-65 years. The researchers found that individuals with a greater level of self-stigma also held a stigmatized attitude toward police officers who sought mental health help. This stigma may be responsible for officers suffering in silence. The impact of social standards from internal and external influences dictate how officers approach seeking help. Wheeler et al. made recommendations that if mental health treatment were mandatory, then the concerns about stigma would diminish.

The literature outlines numerous challenges that impact law enforcement mental health. The current law enforcement training lacks methods and approaches that will circumvent silent suffering among police officers. My study will utilize police officers' responses to interviews to collect data that may complement the current law enforcement training curriculum. Officers are held to a higher standard yet only trained according to the minimum standard which currently lacks significant material on mental health.

Problem Statement

The problem in law enforcement is police officers are a critical component to maintaining our safety and quality of life, yet they struggle with maintaining that standard for their mental wellness. Police officers face job-related stress factors often associated

with verbal abuse, physical harm, and violence (Keech et al., 2020). Violanti et al. (2016) added police officers also experience stress from the lack of trust for their administration due to uncontrolled work schedules, inadequate support, and bureaucratic leadership. According to Keech et al. (2020), policemen and women are at a higher risk of poor health outcomes due to toxic stress. Tuttle et al. (2018) reported that maladaptive coping in the form of increased alcohol and tobacco use are the self-medicating options that police officers choose to manage their occupational stressors.

Healthy coping strategies are not being applied to these occupational challenges because police officers are not trained on how to manage their own mental health (Blumberg et al., 2019). Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) indicated police officers who work at elevated stress levels are at higher risk for depression, anxiety, burnout, physical issues, and potential posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Too et al. (2019) linked the relationship between mental illness and suicide, which are both byproducts of unaddressed stress. According to Roberts (2019), law enforcement suicide is the leading cause of police officer deaths in recent years. Despite these statistics and research, law enforcement officers remain uncertain about their approach to proactively offer mental health services within their organization (Wheeler et al., 2018).

The usage of quasi-military management in most basic law enforcement training and within departmental cultures limits an officer’s ability to freely express his or her perspectives (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019) without penalty or repercussion. This problem has created a culture that denies and avoids immediate solutions to an issue that has long-lasting effects on the community and within the profession (Velazquez & Hernandez,

2019). The results of this study will begin to fill a gap in the literature by examining factors that prevent law enforcement officers from obtaining mental health services.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine factors that hinder law enforcement officers from obtaining mental health treatment when they begin experiencing emotional discomfort. This qualitative study may lead to the discovery of emotional wellness interventions (McDevitt, 2020) that can be included in basic law enforcement training programs.

Research Question

RQ: What factors prevent law enforcement officers in the South-Central region of North Carolina from obtaining mental health services?

Theoretical Framework

I will use the transactional theory of stress and coping, which will be referred to in this dissertation as the Lazarus theory, to understand the cognitive process of stress appraisal and positive coping. Richard Lazarus created this theory in the early 1970s and later collaborated with Susan Folkman to develop the idea of stress and coping as a process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). The process of appraising stress and coping is unique to each individual’s belief about their past stressful experiences. The Lazarus theory highlights the relationship between stress factors and individual efficacy in managing those stressors.

The quasi-military structure in most basic law enforcement training endorses authoritarian management styles that delegate directives to police officers (Pyle &

Cangemi, 2019). Autocratic leadership creates threats and fears among subordinates who experience their environment as hostile and stressful (Guo et al., 2018). Employee autonomy diminishes under this leadership style and creates layers of stress that make the work environment socially unsafe (Guo et al., 2018). According to Guo et al. (2018) employees practice defensive silence, a coping strategy, to avert the threat of authoritative management. Based upon the literature, police officers are exposed to stressors within their agency and community which lead to various coping strategies. The Lazarus theory will serve as a lens to enhance understanding of the factors preventing law enforcement officers from obtaining mental health services.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this research was a qualitative instrumental case study. Qualitative research captures perspectives and narratives from interviews and case studies that categorize data into themes (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The case study was conducted exclusively in the South-Central region of North Carolina. This region may reveal diverse reasons that impact barriers toward seeking treatment. The inquiry method was in-depth, individual interviews. Participants were police officers who work in this region.

Definitions

The following terms will be used in the study.

Basic training: Quasi-military approach to preparing new police officers for a career in law enforcement (Blumberg et al., 2019). Stickle (2016) indicated that basic training is a widely accepted requirement for police officers to learn how to do their job.

In basic training, police officers are educated on self-defense and firearms tactics, use of nonlethal weapons, and the law (Stickle, 2016).

Defensive silence: A coping strategy that eliminates the adversarial relationships and related fear (Guo, 2018).

Direct coping: According to Shafiq et al. (2016) intentional problem solving, plans, and seeking strategic support to resolve challenges.

Fear-Based mindset: A thought process created by stressful or traumatic situations in which the perception of a police officer is potentially skewed by those events (Patterson, 2016).

Field training: Following basic training, police officers are paired with a field training officer for hands on experience. According to Stickle (2016), this training creates the opportunity for the new officer to gain insight from veteran officers who evaluate their knowledge and application of basic training.

"Fitness for Duty" evaluation: A standard created by police psychologists in the late 1980s to assess a police officer's mental ability (Weis & Inwald, 2018). This evaluation is recommended by police administrators who believe a police officer has a psychological impairment that interferes with their ability to perform their duties and is employed to avert potential liability that might be caused by an embattled officer (Weis & Inwald, 2018).

In-Service training: Specific training required by individual states for police officers to remain in compliance with policies and standards (Stickle, 2016).

Indirect coping: A more emotional approach to managing challenges in ways that create unpredictable outcomes (Shafiq et al., 2016).

Job performance: The productivity of the police officer based on quantity of suspension days or disciplinary actions (Aita et al.,2018).

Maladaptive coping: Unhealthy behaviors police officer engage in to manage stress (Patterson, 2016). These behaviors include but are not limited to alcohol consumption, excessive use of force, domestic violence, and suicide (Tuttle et al., 2018).

Occupational stress: Challenges and expectations created by the bureaucratic authoritative leadership and environmental factors that law enforcement officers are expected to handle (Gutshall, 2017).

Personal stigma: The negative perception of individuals who obtain mental health treatment as being weak (Wheeler, 2018).

Police attitude: Marciniak and Elattrache (2020) posited that a higher education equates to a better attitude because of the learning and social atmosphere of higher institutions. Police attitude is the positive or negative ideas police officers have toward topics that affect their line of work.

Posttraumatic stress disorder: A mental health diagnosis following stressful or traumatic events (Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019).

Public stigma: The attribute and social discrediting of mental health (Wheeler, 2018).

Quasi-Military management or structure: An authoritative leadership style where rules and instructions are given without negotiation (Blumberg et al., 2019).

Stress appraisal: The measurement of one's ability to manage the challenge of the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

Stress management: Skill sets and variables that counter job related challenges (Keech et al., 2020).

Suicidal ideation: The thought of taking one's own life (Violanti, 2019).

Working memory: The capability to recall events while performing law enforcement duties (Gutshall, 2017).

Assumptions

The law enforcement culture has a great influence on the police officer's personality. According to Hakik and Langlois (2020) the culture adopts manly behaviors that endorse assertiveness, disparagement, commitment to the mission, and a suspicion of people outside the organization. The culture reinforces a discriminating comradery among police officers which creates an "us versus them" mentality toward civilians who are critical of law enforcement practices (Hakik & Langlois, 2020). The first assumption in this study posits that the stigma of mental health and treatment encourages officers to practice defensive silence when they develop symptoms associated with occupational stress hazards. Based upon the literature surrounding mental health treatment, stigmas and social fears play a significant role in how officers view such help (Hakik & Langlois, 2020).

The second assumption in this study is that the law enforcement culture creates an invisible barrier to treatment. Law enforcement culture influences police officer attitudes toward their roles and duties. The stereotypes adopted by the culture encourage public

and personal stigmas about mental health treatment. Contributing to the gaps of this topic will allow for continued research to build on the current works.

Scope and Delimitations

The study focused on police officers in the South-Central region of North Carolina. This region is diverse and supports a multicultural experience which may produce opportunities to capture varying perspectives about the research question. Because law enforcement culture has a significant impact on how officers perform their duties, it is believed that the diversity of the sample will provide multiple perspectives on how they manage the challenges within the profession.

Johnson et al. (2020) conducted a study on firefighters who work in equally stressful environments where suicidality is an equivalent issue. Johnson et al. emphasized the importance for behavioral health services to understand the culture of the profession they are providing services for. The law enforcement profession is well-known for its privacy and code of silence that leaves outsiders naïve about its culture (Hakik & Langlois, 2020). Mental health professionals without this knowledge are on the outside of this culture. The multicultural data collected may reveal opportunities to improve cultural competence and create interventions that meet the unique needs of police officers. This study will focus on the frontline workers which includes non-ranked police officers, sergeants, and lieutenants. These roles deal with more public contact than the higher ranks within the agency and have a greater risk of witnessing traumatic events more frequently.

Researchers have shown that police officers possess a fear of how other police officers will perceive them if they ask for help (Van Hasselt et al., 2019). Social identity theory focuses on how an individual creates a comparison between their self-efficacy and alignment with the more popular group (E. Carleton et al., 2018). Murphy et al. (2018) and Charman (2020) described social identity theory as the internal assessment an individual makes about his or her fidelity to values within the environment. This cultural behavior produces silos that operate in opposition toward each other (Charman, 2020; & Murphy et al. 2018). I decided not to use social identity theory, because it does not align with self-efficacy and stress factors associated with the job.

Bearman (2019) described thick description as the presentation of human actions in a way that considers the physical and social context of individual experiences. This description allows for the reader to understand and relate better to the research. I will utilize thick description when analyzing the results of this study.

Limitations

One limitation of the study's research design hinges upon interviewees' self-reporting. It is possible that some of the interviewees may be struggling with open and honest dialogue because of the stigma attached to this topic. A second limitation to the study's transferability may be the research design, since the data collection is based upon interviewee responses. Because police officers fear scrutiny from their peers and the public, this may cause them to avoid stigmas by submitting socially desirable responses (Wheeler, 2018). In order to address this concern, confidentiality and anonymity will be

emphasized before participants submit their responses. I will explain the research process and what will be done with the data to each participant with an emphasis on encouraging their honesty. I am a former police officer turned mental health professional. The potential bias is my understanding of mental illness and experience as a police officer. I will address bias by utilizing independent checks of submissions when coding and analyzing data.

Significance

Officer burnout is a contributing factor to mental illness. Undiagnosed mental illness creates irrational, impulsive and unpredictable trigger response (Karaffa & Koch, 2016). My study has the potential to identify barriers that get in the way of providing adequate treatment to police officers who regularly engage the public. Excessive and lethal force events may be reduced with a proactive approach to treating police personnel (Corey et al., 2018). The results from this study may encourage trainers and administrators to implement mental health treatment for law enforcement officers throughout basic law enforcement training, their career, and following retirement. The potential education gained from treatment may improve officer self-awareness of hidden biases and allow an empathic approach to encounters with citizens. This may lead to the development of stronger rapport and community trust knowing that police officers are being proactive in addressing questionable behaviors.

Summary

Law enforcement officers face a great deal of scrutiny on how they perform their jobs (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). The law enforcement training is lacking in content dedicated to mental health (Blumberg et al., 2019). Historically, mental health and law enforcement professionals have not collaborated in efficacious ways to help police officers manage the high occupational stress hazards in their work (Violanti et al., 2019). Statistics show that police officers are highly likely to die from stress related factors (Thoen et al., 2020). With these statistics it is important to identify what support will work best to help police officers manage stress. Law enforcement manifested from a Peelian framework which depended on public approval, accountability, and collaboration (Adegbile, 2017). Poor relationships with administrators and the public are huge stress factors for police officers (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). Research data has shown that police officers who have sought treatment have a more positive perspective (Karaffa & Koch, 2016). Previous data analysis also highlight that police officers are reluctant to seek help because of the stigma attached to mental health treatment (Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019).

Extended stress can exacerbate mental illness and lead to suicide if it is not timely addressed (Keech et al., 2020; Too et al., 2019). If police officers do not know how to manage their daily stressors, then it leads to lethal outcomes. Understanding what factors prevent police officers from obtaining help is important to their wellness. Identifying how police officers identify stress and coping using the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) may provide insight on understanding what type of training is needed.

Utilizing a qualitative case study approach will allow me to obtain data from participants in an authentic way. Active police officers can speak about the law enforcement culture in ways that outsiders are not privy. This culture has a tremendous influence on the assertive, suspicious, and disparaging behaviors exhibited by police officers during public encounters (Hakik & Langlois, 2020). My assumptions are that the major factors preventing police officers from feeling safe to obtain help are mental health stigmas, the law enforcement culture, and authoritative leadership.

The South-Central region of North Carolina will be the focal point of this study because of its diversity in law enforcement personnel and leadership. This diversity may provide multicultural considerations from the study. Transferability and socially desirable responses may create limitations to this study. Understanding the relevance of the problem and how the research was constructed to collect data is paramount to developing or improving transferability. Chapter 2 will provide a review of the relevant literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study's research problem is that police officers struggle with managing occupational stressors, yet they are not proactive in seeking help to address these factors. It is widely known that stress has the ability to diminish a person's quality of life if they lack healthy coping skills. The current literature reveals that suicide, maladaptive self-medicating behaviors, relational conflicts, and poor management of both physical and emotional health sum up the outcomes of poor stress management. The purpose of this study is to examine what factors hinder law enforcement officers from seeking treatment when occupational stress factors begin to impair their ability to function. According to law enforcement health statistics, police officers are likely to have a short life span (McCarty, 2019). This is due to the occupational stress hazards that lead to the burnout they experience while on duty. The mental and emotional routine of the job become habituations that can carry over into the officer's personal life (McCarty, 2019). If this behavior is not managed well, it can create a level of toxicity that complicates the police officer's ability to effectively create mental wellness.

Due to lack of training in mental health awareness, police officers become skilled at avoiding the help they need due to the stigma of mental health treatment. Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) indicated police officers who work at elevated stress levels are at higher risk for depression, anxiety, burnout, physical issues, and potential PTSD. Seeking help is considered a weakness in law enforcement culture, thus, leading officers to suffer in silence. Too et al. (2019) links the relationship between mental illness and suicide, which are both byproducts of unaddressed stress.

This chapter contains sections including Literature Search Strategy, Theoretical Foundation, a literature review related to key variables and concepts followed by a conclusion. The accompanying literature helps to highlight the relationship between unhealthy stress, healthy coping, and factors that get in the way of healthy stress management. The resources were used to expose and address the gap in the literature concerning what encourages silent suffering among officers. The following sections will reveal statistical problems, common stress related themes, and solutions that may work best to aid police officers who are suffering from stress induced conditions.

Literature Search Strategy

This qualitative study sets forth to examine factors that hinder law enforcement officers from obtaining mental health treatment when they begin experiencing emotional discomfort. The literature review in this section contains technological and traditional sources. Electronic sources consisted of peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, and theses retrieved from Walden Library. Host databases included EBSCO, Academic Search Premier, PsycARTICLES Police Government Agencies, PsycEXTRA, MEDLINE with Full Text, Emerald Insights, Wiley, ProQuest Criminal, SAGE Premier, Justice,SocINDEX, PsycINFO, and others. Other electronic sources came from nonprofit organizations like Officer Down Memorial Page, Blue H.E.L.P, and Police Organization Providing Peer Assistance (P.O.P.P.A). Key search terms used were law enforcement suicide, police psychology, theory, police culture, social identity, police administration/management, masculinity, mental illness/mental health stigma. A total of 112 articles were reviewed for this study.

Theoretical Foundation

The process of appraising stress and coping is unique to each individual's belief about their past stressful experiences (Brough et al, 2018). The Lazarus theory will be utilized as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory highlights the relationship between stress factors and individual efficacy in managing those stressors. Richard Lazarus created this theory in the early 1970s and later collaborated with Susan Folkman to develop the idea of stress and coping as a process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

The rationale for using this theory is to demonstrate how unhealthy stress can be mitigated with healthy coping. The Lazarus theory proposes definitions for problem and emotional based coping which can lead to different types of outcomes. The lack of healthy coping skills is a barrier to seeking help due to irrational beliefs about masculinity within the law enforcement culture. For example, silent suffering is a prevalent coping strategy within law enforcement which leads to drug use and other mental impairments up to the completion of suicide. It is fair to assume that a person who completes suicide suffers in silence without asking for the much-needed help due to a lack of coping skills.

It is important to note that all forms of coping are learned or taught by environmental factors such as organizational culture. More intentionally, healthy coping can be taught or modeled through counseling or some other form of therapeutic interventions (Stanley et al., 2016). Counseling is a resource that helps people develop behavioral tools to manage their life-on-life terms. One of the barriers to experiencing the benefits of counseling is the stigma it has in society. Positive coping is a skill set that

officers can learn from the therapeutic relationship with a mental health professional. The Lazarus theory validates that healthy coping is a skill set and effective at managing stress once it is learned. This theory was used to add to the literature and also initiate a discussion that lends relevance to incorporating counseling in law enforcement training to teach officers the skillsets to manage their toxic stress. The following studies illustrate how the Lazarus theory has been previously applied.

Braun-Lewensohn and Bar (2017) conducted a study that assessed the quality of life for wives of military veterans from the Israeli armed forces. Braun-Lewensohn and Bar utilized four quality of life dimensions including physical, social, psychological, and environmental to determine the effectiveness of the target group's coping. The study collected data from 100 military wives six months after a military operation titled "Protective Edge" which activated over 40,000 Israeli reserve officers to participate in combat. The researchers utilized questionnaires to collect data on coping. The study utilized the transactional theory for stress and coping to assess the coping strategies of the sample population. The results found that coping varied among religious beliefs, socioeconomical differences, and whether the wives had children.

The researchers found that religious-based wives relied more upon their religion, used distraction-based coping, and reframed the events in positive ways. Wives from opposite socioeconomic spectrums coped differently. Wives from lower economic status used a variety of coping strategies such as denial or behavior disengagement. The researchers found that women with children reported a lesser quality of life and attributed coping to maladaptive behaviors. The common negative behaviors are disengagement,

denial, self-blame, self-distraction, substance use, and venting. This study highlighted the different demographic factors that influence how each group coped with stress. Furthermore, the beliefs people hold about themselves support or complicate the efficacy of managing stress. Because police officers come from varied backgrounds, they too have beliefs about themselves that will complicate their ability to cope in healthy ways.

Brough et al., (2018) conducted a yearlong study on the impact of employment autonomy, support, and coping strategies in high stress environments on the cognitive and emotional wellbeing of police officers. Brough et al. utilized self-report surveys to collect data from over 2000 volunteers, predominantly male, between the ages of 20-71 years. The surveys were administered at two different times to capture any changes. The study found that accommodation and avoidance coping helped participants manage occupational stressors over time. The research identified that police officers reacted differently to cognitive and emotional job stressors when work engagement is predicted. The study demonstrated that occupational stressors can be mediated with healthy coping strategies when incorporating the transactional theory of stress and coping. In addition, job stressors can be moderated by job control and support which resulted in positive outcomes.

Corpas (2018) completed a dissertation on the impact of stress on Special Weapons and Tactics (S.W.A.T) officers. Corpas interviewed five SWAT officers that included observations. According to Corpas, organizational and operational expectations from administrators are responsible for most stressors. Corpas utilized the Lazarus theory to assess themes that emerged from the research. The study found that the volunteers did

not receive any resources on how to cope with the organizational stressors but rather utilized personal coping strategies to help them manage stress. Corpas indicated that some of the participants in the study admitted to seeking professional therapy to help them cope.

McConkie-Rosell and Sullivan (1999) utilized a concept called genetic counseling in their study. According to McConkie-Rosell and Sullivan, genetic counseling is learning, understanding, choosing, and coping. This counseling approach focuses on empowering the patient with cognitive strategies and information when they are diagnosed with a genetic disorder. The researchers utilized the Lazarus theory to construct a process by which a person can cope with a life changing diagnosis. The relevance of this article underscores the importance of empowering people who are confronted with life changing news or events with coping strategies that allow them to manage that stressor effectively. McConkie-Rosell and Sullivan discussed various strategies that support empowerment such as surrounding the person with peer groups that have gone through a similar diagnosis, providing information about the condition, and creating critical consciousness. The latter suggests that the individual should mobilize a cause or align with civic groups to expand awareness of the issue with others in the community (McConkie-Rosell & Sullivan, 1999).

Moorey (2010) utilized the Lazarus theory with evidence-based interventions to determine outcomes for people who exhibited self-injurious behaviors. Moorey suggested that people who complete suicide or self-injure lack problem solving skills. Problem solving therapeutic interventions help individuals define problems, identify solutions,

create an action plan unique to their life, execute it, and assess its outcomes (Moorey, 2010). Moorey provided a case study where irrational core beliefs developed from a toxic childhood. The study outlined how poor coping became a byproduct of poor problem-solving skills which exacerbated the individual's condition. The study utilized the Lazarus theory to highlight faulty appraisal of environmental stressors and incorporated cognitive behavioral intervention as a therapeutic approach to resolve the matter.

The above literature utilized the Lazarus theory to highlight the relationship between stress and coping. Each study contained situational norms that influenced how study participants coped with their respective stress related challenges. This study is focused on the factors that prevent law enforcement officers from seeking help. Based upon suicide statistics among police officers, these factors contribute to maladaptive coping and poorly managed stress.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Background

The literature review includes peer reviewed articles on mental health challenges and barriers for police officers in need of mental and emotional support. The two main topics are occupational stress and quasi-military management approach in policing. These are conditions that police officers work through on a daily basis. Law enforcement suicide, alcoholism, use of force, heart attacks, and high divorce rates are indicators of unaddressed social and emotional problems that build up over time (R. Carleton et al., 2018) and may be directly related to occupational stress and a quasi-military management

approach. The latter part of this literature review will describe coping skills that may help police officers manage mental health challenges.

Mental Health Issues in Law Enforcement

It is expected that police offices will encounter challenging events while performing their duties. Police officers experience occupational stress hazards at a greater frequency than average citizens due to the nature of their employment. Despite this exposure, the hiring practices and training of law enforcement officers denote that they are able to maintain a level of resiliency, higher standard of tolerance, and professionalism to endure through stress-related challenges (Konstantinos & Judith, 2014; Oh et al., 2017; White & Escobar, 2008). On the contrary, studies have shown that police officers develop mental health issues post hire because of the occupational stress factors and traumatic events they experience on the job (McCarty, 2019; Singh. 2017).

The alarming statistics of high divorce rates, suicides, domestic violence, substance abuse, and poor cardiovascular health (Tuttle et al., 2018; Marzano et al., 2016; Patterson, 2016; Skopp et al., 2019) among police officers questions the efficacy of the psychological assessments, hiring process, training, and mental health supports that police officers receive throughout their career. These mechanisms are designed to weed out people who raise red flags that would eventually become liabilities to the organization. However, the psychological assessments are not effective at gauging long term challenges associated with the aforementioned concerns (Marshall et al., 2021). According to R. Carleton et al. (2018), the alarming statistics that manifest over the course of a police officer's career suggest they are not seeking help. Based upon the

outcomes, police officers are using maladaptive coping to manage the deterioration of their mental health (R. Carleton et al., 2018).

Police officers lack healthy coping skills to manage their stress effectively over time (Marzano et al., 2016; Patterson, 2016; Skopp et al., 2019; Tuttle et al., 2018). Shame, fear, and stigma are relevant correlations to mental health issues in law enforcement (Bikos, 2020; Stuart, 2017). Numerous studies explore the relationship between stress and its impact on the human experience (Lucas et al., 2012) across the life span. Research supports that mental health does not begin during adulthood but rather during the formative years of a person's life (Snyder et al., 2015). Within these years, children learn shame, fear, and stigmas that cause them to remain silent about their mental health challenges (Velasco et al., 2020). Family dynamics, life transitions, and the health of an individual's childhood relationships significantly influence the direction of a person's mental health and coping during adulthood (Cavanagh, 2008; Hussong & Chassin, 2004; Snyder et al., 2015; Wingo et al.,2015).

Occupational Stress in Law Enforcement

Police officers have to respond to unpredictable situations with speed, accuracy, poise, tact and professionalism (Corey et al., 2018). This expectation creates stress because an officer's mind is continuously rehearsing fail-safe responses to rapidly evolving threats, (Harris et al., 2017; Keech et al., 2020) which they hope end without unfair criticism from administrators and the public (Luhman & Nazario, 2015). It is important for a police officer to be right when they use their discretionary authority.

Living up to a standard close to perfect has the potential to develop anxiety and stress (Lucas et al., 2012; Papazoglou et al., 2020).

According to R. Carleton et al. (2020), occupational stress encompasses operational and organizational variables. The operational factors incorporate the duties of police officers, the physiological impact of the job, and the daily unpredictability of calls for service (R. Carleton et al., 2020). In addition, staff shortages, poor training, insufficient resources, incompatibility with leadership styles, and a negative perception of feeling unsupported are organizational factors that contribute to high stress (R. Carleton et al., 2020).

Police officers work long hours and shifts that rob them of valuable family time (Marier & Moule, 2019). Depending on the officer's role such as detective, specialized unit, or special response team, an officer can be called back into work while off duty and it can interrupt time for self-care (Miller, 2007). If there is an expectation that one will be called out at any anytime, there isn't a true opportunity for relaxation. This leaves officers in a mindset that they can never be fully present with their off-duty activities which eventually layers into negative outcomes for a police officer's wellness (Scholarios et al., 2017). This expectation also deprives police officers of their power and control over their time which can increase disengagement (Smoktunowicz et al., 2015).

Officers are expected to maintain a high level of performance and be mindful of their on and off duty behaviors as a sworn police officer (Lucas et al., 2012). This threshold leaves no margin for error and perpetuates the assumption that an officer must be perfect (Lucas et al., 2012; Papazoglou et al., 2020) regardless of their ability to cope.

The expectations from the department and the public challenge the legitimacy of police officers who may become burdened with inner conflicts that lead to hopelessness. Mourtgos and Adams (2020) stated when police officers are criticized for using force justly, they lose faith in the people and processes that question their actions.

Between organizational and operational factors, police officers must be prepared to adjust and adapt to the challenges inside and outside of their agency. Law enforcement policy and procedures are designed to provide officers with a protocol on how to manage organizational and operational variables (Miller, 2007). However, policies and protocols also lead to officer stress (R. Carleton et al., 2020).

Because no two people are alike, all police officers will not respond the same to a rapidly evolving event (Papazoglou et al., 2020). The perception of threats will be evaluated differently by each officer (Snyder et al., 2015). The police officer's response to the unpredictability of a rapidly evolving event must be in line with an agency's policy and protocol in order for that officer to be exonerated of any wrongdoing (Snyder et al., 2015). Managing the unpredictability of an event and staying in line with the policy may lead to subtle complications that eventually complicate the mental health of the police officer.

Traumatic Experiences

Police officers have a reputation for being able to handle the most difficult aspects of the job without losing their ability to remain fit for duty. PTSD is a mental health diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (Marshall et al., 2021). PTSD is the direct or indirect exposure to a traumatizing event where death

or serious injury was experienced (MacIntosh et al., 2015; Hakik & Langlois, 2020). Post-traumatic stress is a prevalent mental health condition within the law enforcement profession (Marshall et al., 2021). Symptoms include avoidance of triggering elements, numbing with mind and mood altering substances, lack of sleep, increased irritability and higher levels of hypervigilance (MacIntosh et al., 2015). These symptoms can arise from terrifying experiences that range from a police officer involved shooting to working through natural disasters that require first responders' aide (R. Carleton et al., 2020).

The impact of PTSD can harm a police officer's cognitive abilities which complicates their capacity to accomplish their role at being a public servant (Gutshall et al., 2017). Research has proven that PTSD leads to maladaptive coping in the form of various addictions, impulsive aggression, and suicidality (Miller, 2007; Gutshall et al., 2017; Hakik & Langlois, 2020 & McCreary et al., 2017). However, research fails to capture the accurate statistics among police officers who are suffering from PTSD due to under reporting (Marshall et al., 2021). This places administrations and health professionals at a disadvantage in supporting officers who may remain silent to preserve their fitness for duty. However, it is a supervisor's responsibility to be in tune with their officers and recognize symptoms that can be addressed with agency policy and protocols (Miller, 2007).

Moral suffering is a byproduct of traumatic experiences (Papazoglou et al., 2020). Papazoglou et al. (2020) defines moral suffering as a police officer second guessing a use of force incident that leads to death or serious physical injuries to fellow law enforcement or civilians. These conditions can lead to the development of extreme stress that

inevitably complicates the police officer's livelihood (Papazoglou et al., 2020; Scholarios et al., 2017; Smoktunowicz et al., 2015). Police officers have different levels of morality and this impacts how their stress is managed (Papazoglou et al., 2020 & Snyder et al., 2015). According to Papazoglou et al. (2020), officers who struggle with moral injuries avoid aspects of the job that are triggering by taking sick leave, seeking a role in another unit, or suffer in silence with low job satisfaction and desires to quit. An officer suffering in silence is highly dangerous for the community because of the impaired cognitive abilities created by undiagnosed PTSD (Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019; Gutshall et al., 2017; Hakik & Langlois, 2020). The silent suffering is influenced by the treatment officers receive from their well-intended decision making that becomes scrutinized harshly by the public and their police administration (Luhman & Nazario, 2015).

A number of researchers have argued that public safety organizations recognize the negative impact of traumatic experiences among public safety personnel (Papazoglou et al., 2020; Singh, 2017; Smoktunowicz et al., 2015; Stanley et al., 2016; Tuttle et al., 2018). However, the organizational structure that is designed to provide law enforcement with protocols to manage their daily duties is also contributing to the burnout (McCarty et al., 2019; McCreary et al., 2017). McCarty et al. (2019) indicated that the practices, policies, and answering calls for service make up the values of a police department. These organizational values dictate the agency upper management's expectation of frontline workers (Brough et al.,2016; R. Carleton et al., 2020). Lentz et al. (2021) states that police officers find value in law enforcement work when they are able to serve the greater good.

According to R. Carleton et al. (2020), frontline workers experience elevated pressure and anxiety from having to prove their value to administrators and coworkers. The conflict between agency and police officer values begins where frontline workers don't feel supported by their administration (McCarty et al., 2019). McCarty et al. (2019) notes that police officers want to feel a part of the process in achieving the agency's mission, however, communicating orders from the top-down without accepting feedback or providing support through dialogue causes front line workers to experience burn out and depersonalization-. If the lingering stress police officers develop from these factors go untreated, it can become toxic to the professional and personal lifestyles of the police officer.

Common Maladaptive Coping Techniques Among Law Enforcement Officers

Professions that are characterized by high levels of job demands, limited control, and scarce support are highly likely to produce adverse cognitive outcomes (Harris et al., 2017). Mental strain complicates functionality and connections with other people (Brough et al., 2018). Coping relies upon what the individual can control at the present moment in their environment. Maladaptive coping includes denial, psychological disconnection, mind- and mood-altering substances, withdrawal from social connections, and impulsive behaviors (Singh, 2017). The current trend from the research is that the strain of the work environment can complicate connections people are designed to have (Gutshall et al., 2017; Miller, 2007). As a result, police officers will cope in substitutive ways to mitigate the stress that may compromise their wellness (Stanley et al., 2016).

An abundance of research indicates that police officers utilize cigarettes and excessive consumption of alcohol to self-medicate their stress (Elovainio et al., 2015; Hakik & Langlois, 2020; Bishopp et al., 2020). The literature indicates that police officers utilize these coping strategies to avoid, numb, and relax the hyperarousal triggered by their duties (Elovainio et al., 2015). These coping strategies are counterproductive to a police officer's mental wellness because they don't fix the stressors. According to Hakik and Langlois (2020), excessive alcohol consumption can impact sleep patterns and induce irritability, loneliness, anger, and create the inability to enjoy healthy connections with others. Law enforcement is a service profession that requires police officers to professionally engage with coworkers and citizens. The maladaptive coping strategies that police officers engage in do not contribute to better outcomes. In fact, they lead to mental illnesses that disrupt the quality of life for police officers and the agencies they work for (Hakik & Langlois, 2020; Tuttle et al., 2018; Miller, 2007).

Common Mental Health Challenges Among Law Enforcement Officers

Mental health issues are heavily stigmatized (Krakauer et al., 2020). Due to this stigmatization, it shouldn't be assumed that police officers will authentically disclose the mental health challenges they might face while on the job (Marshall et al., 2021). The literature points to high occupational stress, burnout, alcohol abuse, PTSD, depression, and anxiety as significant disorders that negatively impact the psychological wellness of police officers (McCreary et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2021; Hakik & Langlois, 2020; Lentz et al., 2021; Karaffa & Koch, 2016). According to Marshall et al. (2021), police

officers generally under reported symptoms consistent with stress, anxiety, PTSD, and depression to their agencies. These mental health challenges are typical byproducts of repeated exposure to stress or traumatic events (R. Carleton et al., 2020) and ultimately refuted by police officers due to stigma.

In order for a person to be diagnosed with a mental health condition they must report their symptoms and the supporting factors that caused their challenges (Marshall et al., 2021). It is assumed by their training that police officers can handle the daily stressors of law enforcement work without professional help (Blumberg et al., 2019). Hence to avoid the judgment of appearing weak, officers avoid seeking help (Marshall et al., 2021). In addition, police officers can be triggered by a current event that reminded them of a traumatic event from their past (Hakik & Langlois, 2020).

The triggers experienced in law enforcement work can create challenges in a police officer's personal life, where their main social supports are strained as well (Tuttle et al., 2018). These factors can cause isolation and self-loathing that worsens the mental health condition and make seeking help difficult for the police officer (Papazoglou et al., 2020; Hakik & Langlois, 2020; Stuart, 2017). According to research, the types of stressors police officers face create negative feelings that lead to low self-esteem, loneliness, insecurities, distrust, hopelessness, and low motivation (Papazoglou et al., 2020) that police officers struggle with while on the job.

According to Hakik and Langlois (2020), the mental health condition of police officers will cause them to avoid people, places, and things that are connected to their triggers. In addition, police officers will have disrupted sleep patterns and practice

isolating themselves from others due to high irritability and frustrations about their worldview (Hakik & Langlois, 2020). Police officers are expected to be resilient and return back into the line of duty following traumatic events (Stanley et al., 2016). Once police officers are debriefed following a critical incident, they are expected to return to work (Miller, 2015). Worse case scenarios take longer depending on the officers coping and nature of the incident (Sherwood et al., 2019; Miller, 2015).

Law enforcement officers are exposed to high risk and traumatic events which studies have shown are highly correlated to mental health disorders (Cerel et al., 2019; Krakauer et al., 20-20). According to Marshall et al. (2021), the greater the mental health condition, the least likely an officer will disclose they have a problem. Suicides are a byproduct of a lingering mental health condition (Cerel et al., 2019). As a result, it is inferred that police officers who complete suicide opt to suffer in silence instead of seeking help (Hakik & Langlois, 2020). According to Cerel et al. (2019), the risk factors that increase the likelihood of suicide are occupational factors such as increased workloads, dangers associated with the job, type of assignment, and lack of mental health resources.

The literature highlights these correlations but also argues that police officers minimize the impact of their mental strain because of the stigma (Hakik & Langlois, 2020; Marshall et al., 2021). Thoen et al. (2020) conducted a study to collect data on suicide prevention programs utilized by law enforcement agencies across the United States. In their study, one of the sample agencies rejected the invitation with the statement “the general public doesn’t need to know officers are suicidal” (Thoen et al.,

2020, p. 131) with context that it might further complicate community trust if the public knew police officers were receiving this type of training.

Quasi-Military Organization

A majority of law enforcement agencies within the United States follow the quasi-military model of management (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). Research has shown that law enforcement and the military share many parallels in operation, culture and mental health outcomes (Karaffa & Koch, 2016; Malmin, 2013). Both the military and law enforcement follow a rank and file order that operates according to an authoritarian management structure (Karaffa & Koch, 2016; Wathne, 2020). Police officers adopt a mentality that they are soldiers in a moral campaign to wage war on crime (Marier & Moule, 2019) just as the military fights in wars to protect American freedom (Malmin, 2013).

Police recruits are introduced to the quasi-militaristic approach during the police academy (Blumberg et al., 2019). According to Blumberg et al. (2019), police recruits are expected to maintain a high standard of discipline, demeanor, and control while being demeaned and harassed by the training staff who behave similar to drill sergeants in the military. Physical exercise and report writing are built in consequences to test the grit of police recruits who are falling short of the program's expectations (Blumberg et al., 2019). For the cadets who rise to the occasion, these training methods are designed to produce solidarity and high fellowship among them, while also weeding out any weak links (Blumberg et al., 2019). Trainers who believe in this approach to training police recruits, support its effectiveness at eliminating candidates who would not be strong

enough to make it as a patrol officer (Blumberg et al., 2019). Blumberg et al. (2019) report that the current training approach hinders the cadet's psychological autonomy, emotional empathy, and social skillsets that support the building of community partnerships to solve problems.

In line with the military, law enforcement incorporates a warrior culture that adopts an adversarial stance toward outsiders which causes police officers to develop doubt, suspicion, disparagement, gloom, control and an intimidating stance toward the public they serve (Blumberg et al., 2019; Brough et al., 2016; Marier & Moule, 2019; Malmin, 2013). The literature alludes to officers not being acknowledged for the good they do but rather greater focus is placed on the negative (Blumberg et al., 2019; Luhman & Nazario, 2015). According to research, titles don't have as much respect as they once did in the past and upper managers do not understand the challenges that frontline workers experience (Brough et al., 2016) while dealing with the public (Blumberg et al., 2019).

Over time the culture has shifted with a greater division between upper management and frontline workers due to objectives influenced by politics and community stakeholders who influence how police officers perform their duties (Wathne, 2020). Personal vendettas and differences between superiors and frontline workers create discontent within the work environment (Luhman & Nazario, 2015). The feelings and beliefs associated with these factors impact work morale and leave employees feeling disconnected from the mission and personal fulfillment gained from the work (Luhman &

Nazario, 2015). These experiences can produce high stress from within the agency that complicates a police officer's mental health.

Law Enforcement Culture

At its core, law enforcement culture is comprised of standards and ideals that dictate how police officers and soldiers perform their objectives with a warrior like mentality (Malmin, 2013). These standards are dictated by law enforcement trainers at the academy level (Blumberg et al., 2019). According to Malmin (2013), the warrior culture consists of one's ability to be resilient in the face of adversity. However, in high occupational stress environments, this culture rejects and denies any form of weakness by suppressing emotions, pain, and trauma with a philosophy that warriors don't receive pain (Malmin, 2013). This ideology obstructs the organic responses police officers have toward stressful factors.

Studies show that high stress environments, trauma, mental health stigma, and the culture of law enforcement are present factors in law enforcement deaths by suicide (Violanti et al., 2019). The perception of the warrior culture is an ambitious ideology that causes more harm than good among law enforcement and military personnel who are completing suicide at a higher rate than previous years (Malmin, 2013; Ramchand et al., 2018; Violanti et al., 2019). According to research, individuals struggling with suicidal ideation are also distressed by mental health disorders, the stigmatization of mental illness (Stanley et al., 2016) and various mental strains (Zhang et al., 2020). As an example, police officers face the pressure of fitting in with the accepted ideals and norms of law enforcement culture (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). These standards create

psychological strains that are connected to a worth (Zhang et al., 2020) that each police officer measures their value. This mentality produces a social complex that causes police officers to lack trust (Adegbile, 2017; Malmin, 2013) for populations that present as anti-police or don't -understand the lifestyle created by the job (Marier & Moule, 2019).

According to Blumberg et al. (2019), law enforcement hierarchy and its culture can contribute to the deterioration or improvement of a police officers' physical health and mental wellness. Law enforcement leadership dictates the direction and cultural norms of the agency. The literature describes law enforcement culture as serving a purpose in both positive and negative ways (Karaffa & Koch, 2016; Wathne, 2020; Hakik & Langlois, 2020). Police culture consists of a blue line comradery where officers are embraced by a social system that supports its own (Hakik & Langlois, 2020). Other cultural aspects of police work include the suppression of emotions as it is a weakness to a police officer's identity (Malmin, 2013). This cultural norm makes it difficult for police officers to ask for the psychological and emotional help they need (Malmin, 2013). As a result, they disconnect from others, and adopt unhealthy beliefs from the organizational culture (Luhman & Nazario, 2015). These conditions can lead to burnout and socio-psychological disorders that grow unnoticed.

Rawski and Workman (2018) state that mental and physical durability represent the perpetual theme of masculinity within law enforcement culture. The nature of police work invites the prototypical officer to possess aggression, bravery, strength and inflated self-centeredness found in men more than women (Rawski & Workman, 2018). This perspective can be summarized as showing no vulnerabilities, dedication to work,

superior endurance, and a willingness to harm each other to succeed (Rawski & Workman, 2018). These subscriptions deny the vulnerabilities that exist within the human experience especially after experiencing direct or indirect trauma (Malmin, 2013).

Hakik and Langlois (2020) state that law enforcement culture stigmatizes any rhetoric on mental illness impacting police officers' ability to do their job. The effects of stigma create depression, feelings of being misunderstood, and diminished self-esteem and quality of life (Hakik & Langlois, 2020). The stigma created by the law enforcement culture has a direct impact on determining if a struggling police officer will seek help for psychological challenges (Hakik & Langlois, 2020).

Summary

Based on the review of the literature, law enforcement trainers and administrators are responding to the growing number of completed suicides among police officers. The literature validates that law enforcement is a high stress occupation. Throughout the training academy, police officers are trained on the professionalism needed to manage organizational and occupational factors. However, not enough education is being provided to train them on how to manage their own mental health. The stress factors associated with the job can produce mental and emotional strain that some police officers may not know how to manage in healthy ways. The literature points to police officer fear of being perceived weak or unfit for duty within the culture of law enforcement. This perspective is manifested in the training and quasi-military model of managing police agencies. However, these factors also lead to great stressors as well.

In addition, the societal stigma of mental illness plays a major role in how police officers suffer in silence. If police officers are not admitting that they need help, then no help is provided to support them. The literature points to the training, culture and quasi-military management model of law enforcement as contributors to the organizational stressors police officers contend with. These factors are designed to help police officers, but there may be some evidence to show that these factors are potentially contributing to why police officers don't willingly seek support.

The help provided to police officers is reactionary instead of proactive. Current law enforcement training and administrators are responding to the negative outcomes of police- officers self-medicating with alcohol, high divorce rates, domestic violence, excessive use of force, and suicides. These events suggest police officers are not openly admitting their mental health challenges until the damage is already done. The research highlights how police officers maladaptively cope with trauma and the high stress factors of the job. Police officers are prone to a host of social, emotional, and psychological complications that impact their professional and personal relationships. The literature shows how self-less police work can be when officers are expected to put their lives on the line for people who may be harsh critics of their actions.

More research is needed to identify what prevents police officers from seeking mental health treatment. This study is an attempt to address the gap and initiate a discussion regarding the invisible barriers to mental health treatment. There is no known research that explores this perspective when considering how to support police officers with mental health services. Chapter 3 will describe the research design of this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine factors that hinder law enforcement officers from obtaining mental health treatment when they begin experiencing emotional discomfort. This qualitative study may lead to the discovery of emotional wellness interventions (McDevitt, 2020) that can be included in basic law enforcement training programs. The sections of this chapter include research design and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, data analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and summary.

Research Design and Rationale

This study's research question is: What factors prevent law enforcement officers in the South-Central region of North Carolina from obtaining mental health services? Several assumptions can be made regarding mental health treatment and the law enforcement profession. However, assumptions are not reliable in a study. Instead, information that explains the phenomena has to be attained from research (Mishra & Dey, 2021). This study will use a qualitative research design. A qualitative research approach allows the researcher to use open ended questions to collect information on what participants are thinking and why (Jenner & Myers, 2019). Because this research question is understudied, this design provided the opportunity to capture unique perspectives and identify patterns in participant responses (Mishra & Dey, 2021). The information from this study not only addresses a gap in the literature but also generates discussion on this topic.

Case studies are one of many approaches utilized in qualitative research. Hyett et al. (2014) described a qualitative case study as an examination and breakdown of an individual or several situations to capture the complexity of the study's focus. It is used to create a comprehensive, varied understanding of a difficult issue in its actual context (Crowe et al. 2011). In addition, case studies can be used to explain causal links and pathways between variables and outcomes that lead to understanding a phenomenon (Crowe et al. 2011; Heit & Rotello, 2010). For these reasons, a case study was the ideal approach to examine individual perspectives of the participating police officers.

Crowe et al. (2011) state that a case study is ideal for nonexperimental research where the variables cannot be manipulated. In order for a researcher to effectively conduct a case study, Mishra and Dey (2021) referenced researchers having a philosophical predisposition to create a perspective that influences how they conduct the research. Crowe et al. similarly referenced the epistemological approach to answer explanatory questions about the topic of the study. One part of this approach is the use of inductive reasoning which allows for the researcher to observe patterns and behaviors within the study that lead to the formulation of a theory (Heit & Rotello, 2010). Ponterotto (2005) identified constructivists as researchers who believe that a person's worldview is created by how they perceive what is in their environment. In this context, no two people will view the same thing in the same way because of their unique experiences (Karagiozis, 2018).

The central phenomenon of this study explored what perceived roadblocks deter police officers from seeking treatment for their mental health challenges. A known

consequence is that the suicide rate among police officers has increased over the last 5 years (Violanti et al., 2019). Suicide is a byproduct of mental illness and an inability to cope with life challenges (Too et al., 2019). In addition to the increased suicide rates among police officers, they are also at a higher risk for alcoholism, divorce, and domestic violence (R. Carleton et al., 2018; Tuttle et al., 2018). These latter issues can be treated by mental health professionals, yet many police officers are not taking advantage of these resources. A case study approach that included individual interviews allowed me to explore the barriers that prevent police officers form seeking mental health treatment.

Role of the Researcher

I worked in law enforcement for 8 years as a master police officer assigned to specialized units such as gang unit, investigations, street drug interdiction, and Special Response Team. Following my law enforcement career, I obtained a graduate degree in clinical mental health counseling where I work as a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor with a specialty in treating trauma and substance use disorders. I have a comprehensive knowledge in both fields from my education, training, and experiences. Although I have this understanding, I do not have a direct relationship with the participants of this study nor is there a concern regarding conflict of interest. My role, as the researcher, aimed to obtain the perspectives of participants in this study and to ensure that participants are no worse off than before the study (Gillani, 2021; Karagiozis, 2018).

Although I am a former police officer and familiar with the culture of law enforcement, it was still necessary for me to build rapport with participants and respect that their perspectives of law enforcement will be different from my own (Karagiozis,

2018). The participant and researcher role are a working partnership where information is requested and collected (Harvey, 2017). My background served as an asset to building trust with the participants as it allowed them to feel more at ease answering the interview questions. As trust is established between the researcher and participant, it can mitigate the participant's fears when communicating about potentially unfamiliar and uncomfortable topics (Karagiozis, 2018). Because this process invited participants to share their individual perspectives with the researcher, I was mindful of my subjectivity (Gillani, 2021; Harvey, 2017; Karagiozis, 2018).

Karagiozis (2018) stated that the researcher is responsible for objectively narrating the participants' responses and confirming the accuracy of interpretation with interviewees. Subjectivity is a form of bias influenced by the worldview, outlook, and beliefs of the researcher and can be a weakness if it is not properly evaluated through a process of self-awareness (Gillani, 2021; Harvey, 2017; Karagiozis, 2018). Subjectivity is an inevitable aspect of qualitative research because it influences the aim of the study (Gillani, 2021). In this context, subjectivity plays an important role, however, it must be managed with reflexivity (Karagiozis, 2018).

Reflexivity allows the researcher to consciously explore their inner thinking, feelings, and perspectives for the sake of scrutinizing them to guard against bias and ethical challenges (Gillani, 2021; Karagiozis, 2018; Maharaj, 2016). Reflexivity can be achieved by maintaining a journal of personal thoughts and perspectives throughout the study to remain aware of internal subjectivity (Karagiozis, 2018; Maharaj, 2016). Harvey (2017) and Karagiozis (2018) agreed that the researcher can provide their internal

observations throughout the discussion of the findings which includes descriptive information about the researcher's experiences so that the reader is aware of how these factors impact the validity and credibility of the study. Previously researchers have agreed that guarding against bias requires the researcher to develop and remain self-aware throughout the progress of their study (Gillani, 2021; Harvey, 2017; Karagiozis, 2018).

If unmanaged, bias can ruin the credibility of a study (Furuya-Kanamori, 2021; Karagiozis, 2018). Gillani (2021) and Ellsworth (2021) indicated that researchers cannot avoid bias because they are impacted by the same social influences as the participants. The damaging effects of researchers failing to acknowledge their own biases will blur the study's findings with their personal viewpoints (Ellsworth, 2012; Furuya-Kanamori, 2021; Karagiozis, 2018). Furuya-Kanamori (2021) and Ellsworth (2021) identified several safety measures that protect the study from bias. Research emphasizes the importance of evaluating how the study was developed and objectively review the flaws within that construct (Ellsworth, 2021; Furuya-Kanamori, 2021).

I acknowledge that my topic is sensitive to the law enforcement community because of the stigma associated with mental illness and controversy related to use of force issues. Police officers are expected to be reasonable in their decision making while people who are diagnosed with a mental health issue are not considered reasonable. Ellsworth (2021) warned that because researchers are motivated by societal challenges in need of a solution, they should consider how the study may be utilized by the media, politicians, opponents of the study, and attorneys. In light of law enforcement suicides

and use of force issues, this study may be reviewed by one or more of the abovementioned. These potentialities further encourage the researcher's vigilance in mitigating bias.

Ellsworth (2021) described several ways to mitigate bias which include utilizing data from credible sources; remaining neutral and surrendering one's attachment to an outcome; seeking the perspectives of peers and dissertation committee; utilizing a checklist that questions and assesses the study's design and data analysis for neutrality; and challenging one's thinking with questions that counter the hypothesis. Maharaj (2016) agreed that a researcher should consistently ask themselves questions about the study after reviewing their field notes and perspectives of collected data. To mitigate bias in this study, I kept a journal of my feelings and perspectives as a mechanical acknowledgment of my awareness to remain neutral (Karagiozis, 2018). I took notes during interviews and documented my impressions of the observations in my journal immediately following each interview (Maharaj, 2016). I engaged in reflexive dialogue with my committee chair throughout the research process (Castell et al., 2021). I also relied upon the Walden University IRB and my dissertation committee to help me develop a checklist of questions that allowed me to evaluate bias throughout the stages of my study (Rout & Aldous, 2016).

Following data collection, processing the information was important when communicating what the research revealed into categories and themes (Newington et al., 2021). I originally intended to use a participant-observer approach to collect data. Maharaj (2016) found the main objective of a participant-observer is to observe the

participants in their natural settings, context, and engagements. In addition, observation creates the opportunity for the researcher to witness daily norms that may exist outside of the participants' awareness (Maharaj, 2016). For this study, I did not have the opportunity to physically observe the participants in their work environment because the interviews were virtual. However, I sought context of the participant's responses that prompted follow up questions. I also made note of questions that the participants avoided or found difficult to answer (Maharaj, 2016).

In addition to collecting the data, researchers must protect the data and identity of the participants (Crowe et al., 2011). I ensured confidentiality by avoiding descriptors of the participants and instead applied codes to represent each participant's identity on their interview notes and video recording while their camera was off (Crowe et al., 2011). Jenner and Myers (2019) indicated that virtual interviews offer another layer of confidentiality where participants can complete the interview from secure and convenient locations. Further, online interviews are inexpensive (Jenner & Myers, 2019) and much safer considering the COVID-19 pandemic and social distance mandates.

Methodology

Rout and Aldous (2016) referred to the methods section as the most critical part of a study because its content can be replicated in future research. The type of research methods that may be used in a case study include interviews, focus groups, surveys, observations, and textual analysis (Crowe et al., 2011). The research method in this study consisted of semistructured interviews. The methodology section discussed criteria for

participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. Walden University's IRB approval number for this study is 06-24-22-0997125.

Participant Selection Logic

Campbell et al. (2020) indicated that purposive sampling is a best practice approach when the selected participants are aligned with the focus of the study. I used purposive sampling for this study. Purposive sampling is defined as a nonobjective form of sampling where the researcher utilizes their judgment to select ideal candidates that will add the greatest value to the research (Campbell et al., 2020). In working with a small sample, purposive sampling allows for an in-depth perspective from ideal volunteers who can provide beneficial information without exhausting resources (Campbell et al., 2020).

I intended to use snowball sampling as a backup in the event recruitment became stagnant. The snowball method is defined as using current participants to help recruit others who fit within the criteria of the study (Fereshteh et al., 2017). This method is commonly applied when it becomes difficult to locate additional participants (Fereshteh et al., 2017). This sampling approach is also inexpensive and allows the primary participant to advocate on behalf of the researcher to participants who would have been unwilling to join the study (Fereshteh et al., 2017). I did not have to use the snowball method because the purposive sampling was sufficient.

The inclusion criteria for participants in this study was: (a) sworn and active police officer who works on patrol or in a specialized unit in the South-Central region of North Carolina, (b) adults age 18 years or older, and (c) English speaking. This

population was the most ideal for this study because they offered in depth perspectives to address the research question regarding the factors that prevented police officers from seeking mental health treatment.

Hennink and Kaiser (2021) stated that achieving saturation depends largely on sample size. According to Hennink and Kaiser, saturation is achieved when no additional insight can be ascertained from the sample size and any additional data collected would lead to redundancy. Qualitative research with unreasonable sample sizes lead to ethical concerns that create waste in research funds and data (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021). Researchers have indicated that saturation in qualitative studies can be achieved using approximately 9-17 interviews of standardized study participants and specific objectives (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021). I utilized purposive sampling to recruit 12 participants that met the inclusion criterion listed above. This sample size was reasonable based upon the homogeneity of the study's population and what the study intends to address (Campbell et al., 2020; Hennink & Kaiser, 2021).

Instrumentation

Researchers utilize instruments to collect data that will be analyzed within the study (Aleandri & Russo, 2015). Interviews, focus groups, and observations are popular forms of qualitative instrumentation (Crowe et al., 2011). In qualitative research, interviews are the most popular because they allow unique perspectives to be explored between researcher and participant (Aleandri & Russo, 2015). Karagiozis, (2018) shared that the researcher is also an instrument because their intellect and subjectivity come into play. I utilized interviews because they are the best approach to collecting information

that will answer my RQ. The interviews allowed participants the space to tell their story, share experiences, and provide perspectives on mental health in law enforcement.

I used semi-structured interviews for this study. Semistructured interviews are utilized in qualitative studies to collect open-ended responses to planned and unplanned questions that explore deeper layers to the participant's lived experiences regarding a sensitive topic (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Semi-structured interview questions were constructed and placed within the interview protocol. According to Castillo-Montoya (2016), the interview protocol consists of a four-step process that emphasizes the importance of aligning the RQ with the interview questions, ensuring that the questions are open ended and promote conversation, obtaining feedback from peer supports, and executing the protocol. Guaranteeing the interview protocol is set up correctly, reinforced the reliability of the study and improved the type of data collected in the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

This study utilized the interview protocol found in Appendix A to conduct semistructured interviews. I created the interview protocol based upon the literature review in this study. I developed my questions according to the current research and what I aim to find out about the RQ. I collected quality responses from the interview questions that created a deeper understanding about the research question (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). This approach allowed for the discovering of the phenomenon that emerged throughout the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment began with establishing the profile of the target population (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). This study recruited active law enforcement officers to participate in this study, because they are most connected to the focus of this research. Participants of this study were recruited by a flyer that stated the purpose of the research. I posted the flyer to the social media sites of agencies that meet the location criteria. These sites included Facebook, Instagram, twitter, and law enforcement agency websites. I posted the flyer every two weeks until the targeted number of participants was reached.

Considering the COVID 19 pandemic, I conducted this interview virtually to minimize concerns about the virus, cost, and convenience to participant privacy. This recruiting effort continued until I was able to interview 12 active police officers. Fereshteh et al. (2017) shared that the sample size and achievement of saturation is subjective. The focus should be centered on gaining a deeper insight of the research question (Fereshteh et al., 2017).

Participation in the study hinged upon willingness of the people who were selected to provide candid responses to the interview questions. I constructed the flyer, Appendix C, that attracted participants to this study. The flyer detailed the purpose and intent of the study along with how to contact the interviewer by email. Participants were also informed of the length of time expected for the interview. I provided participants the details on informed consent for the study and emphasized the assurance of confidentiality toward their answers.

I collected the data using semistructured virtual interviews of volunteers who consented to this study. I asked participants open ended questions from the interview protocol to obtain data on this study's RQ. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) stated that a relational approach is the most ideal when conducting semi-structured interviews. The commonality between researcher and interviewee is essential to building rapport that will allow the interviewee to feel comfortable and provide more meaningful responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I recorded the data using field notes and transcription from the Zoom recording. Note taking is an ideal for data collection, because it is an added security to ensure questions were addressed and can serve as a guide to appropriate follow up inquiries (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Maharaj, 2016).

Maharaj (2016) emphasized the importance of taking and reviewing field notes to objectively authenticate the data that is collected during the interview process. The significance of objective processing is to reduce researcher bias (Karagioziz, 2018; Maharaj, 2016). Karagioziz (2018) argued that maintaining a journal of thoughts and feelings is a mechanical awareness devoted to remaining neutral. Because I have prior law enforcement experience, this journaling and note taking effort was important for the reliability of this study (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Flyers were used to recruit and secure 12 interviewees for the study. Once participants were secured and consented to the study, I conduct semi-structured interviews. Castillo-Montoya (2016), indicated that 60 minutes is a reasonable time to complete a semi-structured interview. I budgeted for one hour time slots with each interviewee. Some interviews went longer and some shorter than the allotted timeframe.

Each participant interviewed once. I closed out each interview with follow up steps and answered any further questions from the interviewee. I documented the reflections I had in my journal and reviewed any field notes completed during the interview (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Maharaj, 2016).

I instructed participants on the next steps of the study and what will be done with their data. I solicited feedback from the participants on their understanding of the research questions to create a stronger alignment (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Morrison et al. (2012) indicated that it is ethical to support vulnerable populations after they have participated in research that could be triggering. Because of the mental health impact on law enforcement officers' fitness for duty, police officers were deemed a vulnerable population. The questions in my interview protocol did not create any challenges that required closure, follow up, or emotional support for the participants.

As a way to debrief this population, I reinforced the positive outcomes associated with the interviewee's participation. I provided the participants with mental health resources to mitigate any harm that could come from the interviewing process (Morrison, et al., 2012). I emphasized the importance of participant contribution to reinforce the benefits of their involvement with this study (Morrison, et al., 2012).

Data Analysis

According to Dejockheere and Vaughn (2019) data analysis takes place simultaneously with data collection. Braun and Clarke thematic analysis of data utilizes a six phased framework (Brough et al. 2016). The framework requires the researcher to become familiar with the data by reviewing the interview recordings and transcripts

(Brough et al. 2016). I used the Zoom virtual platform to record each participant's response in this study. Recording the interview allowed me to focus on listening and asking follow up questions to gain a better understanding as I analyzed what the participant shared. After the interviews were recorded, I saved them to a unique file name and digital folder. I transcribed the interviews with O-Transcribe, a free transcription software. This approach aided the researcher in developing the prominent codes (Brough et al.,2016).

Coding allows a researcher to capture reoccurring themes that address the phenomena within the study (Newington et al., 2021; Brough et al.,2016; Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). I reviewed the data and categorized participant responses into codes, and themes (Dejockheere &Vaughn, 2019). This procedure helped me to analyze the data and make sense out of it for the reader (Dejockheere &Vaughn, 2019; Newington et al., 2021). According to Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019), once the codes are developed, the researcher is tasked with creating the most accurate themes in the data. This is a systematic approach that allowed me to meaningfully organize voluminous information into smaller portions.

Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard, (2019) defined inductive coding as the researcher's intentional usage of the interviewee's terminology and phrases so that the data remains authentic. Brough et al. (2016) agreed that utilizing inductive coding to complete the analysis is determined by the collected data and not previous research. Inductive coding allowed me to reduce the data to smaller categories. After reading the transcript and listening to the audio, I documented the codes as they were revealed by the

respondent's answers to interview questions. According to Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019), I should end up with more than 50 codes which I can reduce to a second layer of more narrow focus. The literature describes inductive coding as one approach to categorizing the data and placing it into themes (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

The thematic analysis groups the codes into themes or categories that add deeper meaning to the data (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). This analysis lead to an overarching theme that emerged from the recurring pattern in the data (Castell et al., 2021; Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). I separated the codes into similar themes and sub-themes. I continued this process until the ability to narrow the codes more finitely lessened.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a critical aspect in qualitative research. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) shared that trustworthiness begins with determining the accuracy of the data. Castillo-Montoya, (2016) shared a similar perspective when establishing reliability within a qualitative study. Both researchers expressed the importance of following up with participants by providing them with copies of the data to validate its accuracy (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Participants were provided transcripts and summation of notes to determine reliability of the data. Hence, it was critical for my methodology to be detailed in order to justify the design and improve the understanding of the reader (Hyett et al., 2014).

Credibility is the result of linking the data obtained from the research to the reality of the participants who -were the focus of the study (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Credibility can be achieved by managing personal and selection biases in a qualitative study (Gillani, 2021). Fereshteh et al. (2017) states that bias is reduced by using a purposive sampling method which allows for homogeneous volunteers who through a snowball method can connect the researcher to other participants until saturation occurs. Saturation is achieved when no additional insight can be ascertained from the sample size and any additional data collected would lead to redundancy (Hennink and Kaiser, 2021). According to the research, vetting the interview questions through a member checking process improves data collection from subsequent interviews which increases the reliability of the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Transferability is the application of the study's findings to other settings (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Providing a script in the protocol that includes questions that seek to gain understanding from the people being interviewed (Castillo-Montoya, 2016) allows for thick description in field notes (Maharaj, 2016). This strategy can increase transferability through thick description that provides context narratives of the participants' answers (Hyett et al., 2014). In addition, the effectiveness of capturing accurate context hinges upon the researcher's understanding of the participants' cultural norms and relatable jargon that is familiar to this population (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

The dependability of a qualitative study is determined by the sustainability and consistency of its results over time (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I created dependability in this study by keeping a record of all the steps I took when coding data

obtained from the interviews. I initially intended to utilize NVivo as the coding software but instead opted for a more economical option in QDA Miner Lite. I used this coding software to compare the manual coding to improve dependability (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Asking participants how difficult they found the questions or providing feedback on the jargon used to ask the questions helps to reword any questions that are identified as confusing (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Confirmability determines whether or not a researcher's bias influences the findings in the study (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Confirmability can be established by documenting the process for examining the data. Castillo-Montoya (2016) recommends a close review of the protocol by academic peers and research committee members who will act as if they are the interviewee to fine tune understanding. In order to achieve confirmability, I invited my committee to review my work and provide feedback from their perspectives. Throughout the process I maintained a reflexive journal of the research process. I used the journal to document the specific actions, ideas, and feelings as I process the data collected during the research (Carcary, 2020). The documented reflection allowed me to assess my thoughts, biases, and values throughout the study (Karagiozis, 2018).

Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019) express the importance of having multiple people involved in the coding process. This is known as intercoder reliability where the researchers agree to the approach on how to code the same content (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The varied experiences and perspectives that each researcher brings to the table also creates a positional reflexivity that proves valuable to the data analysis

(Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Positional reflexivity is the researcher's perspective of all environmental and internal factors involved in establishing themes from the data (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Coding consists of several layers beginning with a broad to finite way of categorizing the data (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Patterns developed from this process, and I was able to analyze the connections between them otherwise known as triangulation. Triangulation allowed me to connect what manifests from this study to previous literature in order to validate or create new ideas to include in the analysis (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Ethical Procedures

Ethical procedures allow the researcher to address any issues that hinder the study's progress and maintain fidelity to the participants (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I ensured ethical compliance by providing each respondent an informed consent, Appendix B, at the start of the study. Approval was obtained by having participants reply to the invitation email with the words "I consent." I listed the study's purpose, procedures, and sample questions from the protocol in the informed consent form. In addition, I highlighted the voluntary nature of the research. The volunteers were not reimbursed for their participation.

The risk of the study was minor and did not exceed what is typically experienced by people in their everyday environment. I am a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor by profession, and there are limits to confidentiality as a result. I am bound by the American Counseling Association ethical codes to report instances of a client becoming an imminent danger to themselves or others. Although it is my job to protect

the respondent's privacy, breaking confidentiality will only be necessary if I believe it will resolve the imminent threat to the respondent or others. The criteria for breaking confidentiality are:

- When a respondent discloses active suicidal or homicidal ideation;
- When I suspect child, elder, or dependent adult abuse;
- When the respondent has directed me to share information about their situation;
- When I receive a qualifying court order.

I was aware of the emotional challenges created by exploring mental health issues. In preparation for this study, if the participant began experiencing triggering emotions like anxiety or depression, I was prepared to provide them with local and 24-hour mental health resources that work with first responders such as Self-Talk Counseling & Consulting, PLLC, or 888-Cops-Cop (267-7267) Police Organization Providing Peer Assistance – POPPA.

This study was completed with individuals who freely volunteered. Participants were informed about their voluntary participation and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I made participants aware of their right to not answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. Participants had the option to freely stop at any time in the study if they changed their mind about volunteering.

As an additional safeguard, I saved the data collected from this study on a dedicated external hard drive which is stored in a personal fingerprint access safe deposit box. Access to the hard drive data is protected with a strong password containing both

upper- and lower-case letters, numbers, and symbols. The data from the study is being preserved for five years as required by Walden University. At the five-year mark, the data will be erased and destroyed. Walden University's IRB approval number for this study is 06-24-22-0997125.

Participants' names were replaced with an alphanumeric code, and their personal information will be kept separate from the study. I informed volunteers about the benefits of this study which aims to create a discussion around non-stigmatized interventions that could help police officers address their stress in healthy ways. Once the analysis is complete, I intend to share the overall results by emailing each participant a link to a summary.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the methodology and research approach used to answer the RQ: What factors prevent law enforcement police officers in the South-Central region of North Carolina from seeking mental health treatment? In this chapter, I defined the study's method, data collection process, the target population, ethical considerations, my role as the researcher, and possible biases. In closing, I used QDA Miner Lite to help code the data thematically to identify commonalities among the participant responses. In Chapter 4 I will collect data from the participants and organize the data into codes that provide insight into obstacles that hinder law enforcement from seeking help.

Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative research aimed to examine factors that hinder law enforcement officers from obtaining mental health treatment when they begin experiencing emotional discomfort. The research question that guided this study focused on addressing the factors that prevent law enforcement officers in the South-Central region of North Carolina from obtaining mental health services. Researchers have shown that law enforcement culture is culpable in creating the fear and shame of being weak or failing to live up to the expectations of reliability in the face of a high emotional event (Wheeler, 2018). In addition, researchers have shown that police officers' unwillingness to seek treatment while facing moderate to severe stress becomes a greater liability to themselves, their agency, and the community (Weis & Inwald, 2018). With the recent uptick in suicide rates among police officers (Roberts, 2019), it is imaginable that officers are experiencing greater levels of stress without adequate support or interventions.

I interviewed volunteers with open-ended questions to get their perspectives on the research question. I created the study to identify the factors contributing to the suicide rate among police officers. For this study, I conducted interviews utilizing open-ended questions to get the volunteer's perspectives on the research question. My purpose is to see if these factors are changeable without compromising the safety of the community and the police officer. In addition, I hope to gain insight into proactive interventions that will encourage the positive receipt of mental health services among active and retired police officers.

The interviews provided data that best captured the contemporary perspectives and experiences of the study's volunteers. The data collected will allow researchers and law enforcement trainers to advance their understanding of viable mental health options. This study will provide law enforcement administrators and trainers with commentary that exposes the police officers' perceived barriers when they need help. This chapter will highlight the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, thematic coding, and trustworthiness.

Setting

I initiated the study with a purposive sampling approach to gather data from in-depth, semistructured interviews. These interviews took place with 12 sworn and active police officers from the South-Central region of North Carolina. The interviews were conducted virtually and coordinated according to the volunteers' schedules. No organizational conditions that impacted the participants or their experiences during the research would have influenced the data analysis.

Confidentiality and privacy were paramount to the success of this study. The consent form highlighted how I would protect the volunteer's identity. To ensure the integrity of the volunteer's confidentiality, I reiterated my commitment to keeping any identifying information separate from the study. In addition, post-Covid-19 and concerns about monkeypox were also a factor that reinforced maintaining social distance and a preference for telephonic or virtual communication.

Before the interview, volunteers were instructed by email to ensure they had a safe space to communicate virtually without distractions. Some participants were

interviewed from their residence, back yard, work office, or vehicle. I conducted the interviews from two locations, my private practice office, and home, to ensure the same privacy considerations and minimal interruptions.

Demographics

The inclusion criteria targeted sworn and active police officers who worked on patrol or in a specialized unit in the South-Central Region of North Carolina. They must be an adult aged 18 years or older and English speaking. I obtained the data from 12 volunteers who met the inclusion criteria in the study. The demographic questions in this study include ethnicity, gender, age at the time of this interview, current role, and years of experience. The ages ranged from 35-51 years. Six of the 12 were in management. Years of experience varied from 5-26 years. Ten men and two females participated in the study. According to Hennink and Kaiser (2021), data saturation in qualitative studies can be achieved using approximately 9-17 interviews of standardized study participants and specific objectives. A sample size of 12 volunteers was deemed sufficient by my dissertation committee. Table 1 provides greater detail on the diversity of this samples ethnicity, age, roles, and years of experience (years of exp).

Table 1

Demographics Summary

Participant	Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Role	Years of exp.
P1	African American	M	35	Patrol	5
P2	Greek American	F	44	Lieutenant	15
P3	Asian American	M	51	Patrol	26
P4	Caucasian	M	49	Sergeant	26
P5	African American	M	48	Lieutenant	24
P6	Latino American	M	50	Lieutenant	26
P7	Asian	M	42	Patrol	17
P8	African American	M	46	Corporal	19
P9	African American	M	43	Community Coordinator	21
P10	African American	M	39	School Resource Officer	7
P11	African American	M	40	Deputy Sheriff	16
P13	African American	F	38	Captain	15

Data Collection

Following Walden University's IRB approval, the recruitment process began by posting flyers to law enforcement social media, websites, emails, and online contact forms via the law enforcement agency websites and support groups. I provided hard copies of the flyer to police officers at local community events. The recruitment process lasted 18 days, from June 26, 2022, to July 14, 2022. Once officers began responding to

the flyer invitation via my Walden student email, I replied with a personal introduction. I validated whether or not the participants met the criteria for the study.

The process yielded 20 responses to the flyer invitations. A total of 19 volunteers were eligible and received an email copy of the consent form. Only one volunteer did not meet the criteria due to being nonsworn personnel. Of the 19, only 14 provided consent to proceed with the interview process. I offered these 14 volunteers an alphanumeric pseudonym ranging from P1-P14 in the order of their consenting email. I created a folder within my Walden University email account to track the emails from interested volunteers. I followed up by emailing a copy of the consent form for the volunteer's review. I requested that the volunteers reply to my email with the statement "I consent" if they agreed to participate in the study.

I created a password-protected word document of a running log to track when volunteers contacted me, consented, and scheduled their interview dates. These factors were color-coded according to my reference key for the initial data collection steps. I utilized the colors green, yellow, teal, and red. Green meant the volunteer completed the stage, yellow meant the action was pending, teal highlighted volunteers I had to follow up with after four days of no response, and red designated the volunteer that either did not meet the criteria or opted out of the study.

I followed up on the volunteer's consent with an email detailing a table filled with available time slots for their interviews. I provided two weeks of available dates and time slots that volunteers could select. I instructed volunteers to pick their top three time slots to circumvent conflicts between times specified by other volunteers. I assigned time slots

on a first reply basis and sent emails regarding the virtual interview etiquette. During this email, I provided volunteers with pseudonyms to reinforce confidentiality and anonymity. In addition, I also requested the volunteer's phone numbers as a backup plan for recording the interview by telephone if the Wi-Fi connection was poor.

After participants responded with their date and time, I created a Zoom invite titled "Kareem Puranda's Dissertation/Study-P_." The Zoom invitation detailed my name, the volunteer's respective pseudonyms, and the virtual interview link. I emailed the volunteers a copy of the interview questions a day before their interview at 8 am to familiarize themselves with the open-ended questions they would be asked. I sent the volunteers who had not responded to the consent form a follow-up email after 4-5 days. I sent out follow-ups as needed to the volunteers who consented until I could confirm 12 interviews. Once I achieved 12 interviews, I closed the recruitment process.

I collected data from 12 participants who met the inclusion criteria for this study. I adhered to the inclusion criteria, which targeted sworn and active police officers who work on patrol or in a specialized unit in the South-Central Region of North Carolina, adults aged 18 years or older, and English speaking. I used semistructured interviews that contained open-ended questions. The ages of the volunteers ranged from 35-51 years old. Six of the 12 volunteers held administrative positions.

I conducted virtual in-depth semi-structured interviews using the zoom platform. The volunteers chose various locations to conduct their virtual interviews. Some volunteers interviewed from their residence, while others chose their back yard, work office, or vehicle. I completed the interviews from my work and residential office spaces,

where I would have the most privacy and minimal distractions. The interviews averaged 50 minutes in length, with the shortest interview lasting 20 minutes and the longest lasting one hour and 31 minutes. I recorded the interviews on my laptop and transcribed them with the O-transcribe software. The data was transferred from my computer to a dedicated thumb drive. I labeled each file according to the participant's pseudonym and the interview date. When not in use, I protected the thumb drive in a secured lock box.

Before recording on the day of the interview, I briefly reintroduced myself to the volunteer, reiterated the study's purpose, and thanked the participant for their contribution. I replaced the name of the volunteers with the alphanumeric pseudonyms they were assigned after their consent date. The participants were instructed to keep their cameras off to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Some participants were not concerned with confidentiality or anonymity, while others were more willing to speak. I activated the recording and read the opening statement in the interview protocol.

I addressed the volunteers according to their assigned pseudonyms throughout the interview. The questions were designed to invite authentic feedback and perspectives about factors that prevent law enforcement officers from seeking mental health services. I was the data collecting instrument in this study. I created the interview questions listed in the interview protocol. I coded the data from each interview according to the context and meanings of the respondent's answers without bias.

I identified a few minor unexpected circumstances. For example, P12 consented at an earlier time but never scheduled an interview. P13 consented after P12; however, they scheduled and completed their interview before P12. 11 other volunteers conducted

their interviews before P12; hence I did not include P12 in the study. Poor Wi-Fi connection was another unexpected circumstance that I had to mediate. Two of the 12 interviews began on the zoom platform and then shifted to the telephone due to poor internet connection. One interviewee experienced a bad rainstorm, and the other encountered poor Wi-Fi service. Finally, two volunteers had to cancel and reschedule their appointments at the last minute due to other conflicts. Outside of these challenges, the data collection did not present any unusual circumstances.

Data Analysis

The open-ended questions allowed the volunteers to share their authentic lived experiences and articulate their perspectives about the barriers that prevent police officers from seeking help. I utilized Braun and Clarke's six-step framework to analyze the data. My first step in analyzing the data was to familiarize myself with the participant's responses and take notes. I then transcribed the interviews verbatim using O-transcribe. Once the transcription was completed and formatted, I reviewed the transcripts of each volunteer in preparation for coding. I used an economical option, QDA Miner Lite, a free qualitative coding software. I uploaded the interviews into the QDA Miner Lite and created three categories.

I used the literature review to generate the interview protocol, which became the three categories for data analysis: *beliefs and training, occupational stressors,* and *mental health issues*. I used the categories to develop the framework in each interview's beginning, middle, and end thematic analysis. I created 1,330 codes from the transcripts. I

then established themes and sub-themes from the codes and placed them in their relevant category. The study produced 11 themes and 34 sub-themes. Table 2 provides a summary of the categories, themes, and sub-themes generated from this data analysis.

Table 2

Categories, Themes, and Subthemes

	Category A: Beliefs and Training	Category B: Occupational Stressors	Category C: Mental Health Issues
Themes	• Perspective about law enforcement before joining • Reasons for becoming a law enforcement officer • Training on mental health (stress factors)	• Perspectives on management • Day to day experiences • Traumatic events • Acceptable emotions at workplace	• Coping • Perspectives on seeking mental health treatment • Officer's view of their agency's support for seeking help • Improvements to mental health supports
Sub-Themes	• Negative Perspective • Positive Perspective • Bad encounter with law enforcement officer • Financial Stability • To be helpful to others • Positive interactions with law enforcement • 0 Hours • 2-8 Hours • 8+ hours	• Ineffective • Effective • Highly Stressful • Internal Department Conflicts • Managing the perspectives of the uniform • Management of personal and professional life • Handling administrative tasks • Crime Scene • Dealing with Armed Subjects • Empathy and care • No emotions • Objectives over emotions	• Effective Coping • Ineffective Coping • Professional Identity • Detachment • Fear of being judged • Ego • Info used against them • Lack of trust • Agency Supportive • Agency Not Supportive • Increased support for patrol officers • Mental health education • Normalize Counseling

Volunteers provided examples and stories that supported their perspectives. I theoretically and inductively analyzed their responses to generate a deeper understanding of the factors that prevent police officers from seeking help. I coded every relevant portion of the volunteer's response that provided something noteworthy to the study's topic. I used open coding approach and converted the codes into themes according to the context and patterns that emerged from the interview responses. For example, I coded the stories about traumatic calls for service under Category B-Occupational Stressors. The statements involving that data became the theme of traumatic events with a sub-theme of a crime scene. Each respondent articulated unique reactions to these types of calls they had witnessed. One such response was provided by P6, who described that the trauma from seeing a loss of life was not as significant as his empathy for the victim's families. P6 summarized his perspective in this statement,

> I think the most difficult part of the traumatic events have been watching the effects of those left behind, you know, family members, fellow police officers, just witnessing what those folks go through whether it is a homicide, a suicide, yeah, the most difficult part of that is seeing what's left behind.

Another example of forming themes under category C-Mental Health Issues related to how respondents were *coping* with their occupational stressors in either *healthy* or *unhealthy* ways. Respondent P9 stated, "I guess I'm numb to it. I don't know how to answer that." He added that he doesn't do anything to address his stress and is, "always working… [and] falls into that rhythm" which becomes a part of who he is. Discrepant cases were not found in this study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Before I began the study, I confirmed reliability and validity in multiple ways. At the start of the study, Walden University IRB assisted in establishing credibility. Before the data collection, the Walden IRB approved all required documents to ensure credibility and validity. Following the study, I employed multiple measures to reinforce trustworthiness, such as detailed thick description, field notes, data triangulation, reflexivity strategies, and journaling. Implementing these methods throughout the study proved beneficial in establishing the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data analysis.

Credibility

In this qualitative study, I took extra measures to ensure credibility. I vetted the interview questions through my committee. I was provided sound feedback and adjusted my questions to ensure they would legitimize answers to my research question. After processing the input, I made the necessary changes to improve the data collection and reliability of the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Because I am a former police officer, I was conscious of my biases and predetermined beliefs. I managed my personal and selection preferences by using a purposive sampling method. This method allows homogeneous volunteers to share their insights on the RQ (Campbell et al., 2020). The purposive sampling yielded 20 responses to the posted invitations. I did not use the snowball method for this study as the primary sampling method was sufficient for obtaining 12 volunteers.

Transferability

I used the questions from the interview protocol to gain context narratives from the participants in the study. The effectiveness of capturing accurate context hinges upon the researcher's understanding of the participants' cultural norms and unique jargon that is commonplace to this population. With transferability in mind, I have documented field notes, thick descriptions, and a protocol that guided my process of collecting data. This approach ensures transferability where the application of my study's process can be duplicated in another research (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Dependability

I created dependability in this study by maintaining a detailed record of all the steps I took when manually coding the data obtained from the interviews. After coding the data into categories, I utilized the coding software, QDA Miner Lite, to compare the manual coding and improve dependability (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). I requested feedback from the participants on how difficult they found the questions to improve the wording and reduce confusion. The audit trail is a strategy that allows outside researchers to examine the methodology, data collection, and research design that led to the study findings (Carcary, 2020). I utilized my committee members to assist with audit trails to validate the rigor applied to the study. The dependability of qualitative research is determined by the sustainability and consistency of its results over time (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Confirmability

I ensured that I maintained a level of awareness to avoid influencing the finding in this study with my bias. I established confirmability by completing an audit trail. Throughout the process, I maintained a reflexive journal of the research process and practiced reflexive strategies to manage my personal biases. I used the journal to document specific actions, ideas, and feelings as I processed the data collected during the research (Carcary, 2020). The documented reflection allowed me to assess my thoughts, biases, and values throughout the study (Karagiozis, 2018).

Results

In this study, I explored the beliefs, skillsets and behaviors of active police officers regarding mental health treatment. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 open-ended questions and possible prompts. I interviewed 12 sworn and active police officers who work on patrol or in a specialized unit in the South-Central region of North Carolina. The volunteers were adults, age 18 years or older and English speaking. Six of the 12 were ranked higher than patrol. The study collected data from 10 male officers and two female officers. Seven of the volunteers were African American and the remaining ethnicities were Caucasian, Filipino, Greek-American, Asian, and Latino. The participants work experience ranged from 5-26 years which averaged out to 12.5 years total. See table one for detailed summary on demographics.

To address the RQ, I divided the themes that emerged from the study into three categories, A-*Beliefs and Training,* B-*Occupational Stress*, and C-*Mental Health Issues*. These categories were created from the literature review. During the data analysis, I

assigned codes to the respondent's answers and aligned them with the most appropriate category. For example, I moved the respondents' answers about *day to day experiences* and *traumatic events* from Category A to Category B. I initially asked questions about coping and emotional wellness in Category B and moved those responses to Category C. I used these categories to collect data which I coded to create a thematic context of the experiences that shaped the respondent's perspectives about the profession, their stress and mental health.

Category A: Beliefs and Training

I analyzed what shaped the volunteer's beliefs and skillsets to perform the job of law enforcement. The volunteers identified their initial thoughts about the profession and unanimously discovered it wasn't what they expected. Each respondent held beliefs that were shaped by environmental factors. Every respondent was trained by a law enforcement academy yet held different viewpoints on how their training prepared them to manage on-the-job stress.

Category A consisted of three themes. The first theme is perspective about law enforcement before joining, where volunteers shared unique experiences that impacted their views on the profession. Another theme was the reasons for becoming a police officer. The volunteers shared various experiences that influenced their decision to join the law enforcement profession. The third theme explores the facets of training dedicated to managing mental health struggles and the time their agency provided.

Theme 1: Perspective About Law Enforcement Before Joining

The first theme, comprises two sub-themes: positive and *negative perspectives*

that motivated respondents to join the force. Volunteers shared experiences that ranged from being inspired by family and friends to join the profession to the mistreatment of their friends by law enforcement officials. Each volunteer saw the law enforcement profession as an opportunity to improve the quality of life for themselves and their community.

Subtheme 1.1: Positive Perspectives.

Several of the police officers had family members who served in the armed forces and specifically law enforcement. Respondent P5 joined the explorer's program at his local sheriff's department during his youth. He stated, "I had law enforcement in the bloodline of my family." Respondent P5's father and uncle both worked for the criminal justice system as a deputy sheriff and correctional officer respectively.

Respondent P6 identified his uncle as his "one very positive influence from a law enforcement perspective." Respondent P6 shared that his uncle and coworkers were inspirational and encouraged him "to go ahead and take a dive into law enforcement." P10 saw police officers as the good guys, "They're there to help out when you need." P3 considered himself "pretty athletic" and was "sold" by his friend's feedback about the profession, ' …we got to drive fast, fight.' And he loved it. I saw him happier than ever." P9 signed up to do the job because of what he saw on television, "I thought that's what it was about, running and gunning and chasing and that was it."

Subtheme 1.2: Negative Perspectives.

Some of the volunteers shared negative experiences that influenced their perspectives about law enforcement which ultimately inspired them to join the

profession. Respondents P1 and P8 shared that they both had friends who were harassed by police officers during their youth. P1 indicated that these events motivated him to become law enforcement because he "…really wanted to see things be different in [his] hometown." Respondent P13 shared a similar experience where she felt, "some people take it too far and go overboard with little stuff." P13 described how the police officers in her former neighborhood "would just bother people for no reason." P4 mentioned that he was raised in an underserved community. He stayed away from the police officers in his childhood neighborhood because, "the police weren't very friendly to us."

Table 3

Perspective About Law Enforcement Before Joining

Themes	Sub-themes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
1. Perspective about law enforcement before joining	Positive Perspective	9	My perspective in law enforcement was that they were the good guys. They're there to help out when you need. (P10)
	Negative Perspective	8	I grew up in a lower socio-economical area and the police weren't very friendly to us so I stayed away from them. (P4)

Theme 2: Reason for Becoming a Law Enforcement Officer

The second theme provided interview responses that produced several subthemes. The volunteers were motivated by personal reasons and social justice for joining the police force. The responses given by the respondents revealed that their early life experiences with police officers played a crucial role in choosing this career path.

Subtheme 2.1 Bad Encounters

The first subtheme was *bad encounters with law enforcement officer*. Volunteers shared that they had bad experiences with police officers which later became their reason for joining the force. Respondent P1 discussed his desire to be “a change agent” within the law enforcement profession, “versus someone who would just stand by and… not attempt to do anything about it.”

Subtheme 2.2 To Be Helpful to Others.

Other volunteers desired *to be helpful to others* in their community, like respondent P10 who expressed that he desired to help people, “who come from similar backgrounds and have been in similar situations in dealing with law enforcement.” Respondent P3 shared that he wanted to work a job “that was a little different.” He wanted to use his athleticism as a former college athlete and martial artist “to be someone that people can rely on for help.”

Subtheme 2.3 Financial Security

It was also shared by the volunteers that they wanted to establish *financial security* which inspired them to see a future in law enforcement. Respondent P4 shared he was seeking a job opportunity that would provide him stability and help to pay bills. Initially, he only cared about receiving a check but found the work to be meaningful and, “… realized that this is what [he] was called to do in life.” Respondent P13 worked at her first agency part-time while obtaining her bachelor’s degree. Upon graduating, she needed a fulltime job “during [the] recession.”

Subtheme 2.4: Positive Interactions With Law Enforcement

Another respondent shared that they were inspired by *positive interactions with law enforcement* which piqued their interest in the profession. Respondent P2 shared that she had very little dealings with law enforcement but learned about it while waiting tables at her father's restaurant. According to P2, her interest to pursue a career in law enforcement stemmed from experiences where "the local officers and deputy sheriffs… would engage with [her] and [she] started learning about the profession." Respondent P5 shared that he was sold on working in the profession during college after completing his internship with the local police department. P5 stated, "I did several ride-alongs for a year-long… in the 90's, so that kind of sealed the deal."

Table 4

Reason for Becoming a Law Enforcement Officer.

Themes	Subthemes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
2. Reason for becoming a law enforcement officer	Bad encounter with law enforcement officer	5	I was determined to become a change agent in the field versus someone who would just stand by and know that some of these things are wrong and not attempt to do anything about it. (P1)
	To be helpful to others	8	I just wanted to be someone that people can rely on for help. (P3)
	Financial Stability	4	I guess my basis on this was, in the beginning, something that I could get into that was stable, that was going to pay the bills, get me a check coming in and then as I started to get into it I realized that this is what I was called to do in life (P4)
	Positive interactions with law enforcement	5	… when I was about to graduate, I did my internship with [the] Police Department and I did several ride-alongs for a year-long… in the 90's, so that kind of sealed the deal. I was like, okay I definitely can do this. (P5)

Theme 3. Training *o*n *M*ental *H*ealth (*S*tress *F*actors)

The third theme comprises several sub-themes where respondents shared the weightage given to their mental health training in order to keep them mentally fit for the job. In some cases, the volunteers were trained on mental health for twenty-four hours, whereas in other cases ranged from 0 to 8 hours.

Sub-theme 3.1: Zero Hours. Respondent P6 shared that he attended the academy 26 years ago and "there was nothing specifically geared towards mental health, or employee wellness." Respondents P4, P8, and P9 have 20 plus years in the profession

and all of them shared that they didn't receive any training on mental health during their training academy.

Sub-theme 3.2: Two to Eight Hours. Several volunteers shared that they received some form of mental health training that they assumed ranged between *2 -8 hours*. Several officers indicated that it wasn't a formal training but more so a personal account from an active or former police officer who survived a critical incident. Volunteer P1, who has approximately 5 years of law enforcement experience shared that topics on mental health were "…one of the shortest of the topics in [his] police academy."

Sub-theme 3.3: Eight Plus Hours. Respondent P3 shared that he "probably" had up to "24 hours" of mental health training out of the entire basic law enforcement curriculum. Respondent P2 advised that she entered the profession in a different state during the mid-2000's and transferred to NC years later. She indicated that the instructors from that state were more inclined to speak on mental health and "how important it was for your career and for your future, personally, [and] professionally." However, when she transitioned to NC back in 2012, she stated "I don't recall there being anything" on mental health.

Table 5

Training on Mental Health (Stress Factors)

Themes	Sub-themes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
3. Training on mental	0 Hours	7	Zero (P4)

health (stress factors)	2-8 Hours	4	They had a couple of officers just come speak with us, just the after effects of law enforcement and that was probably like one day eight-hour courses. (P11)
	8+ hours	3	I would say roughly, maybe 24 hours, I guess, something like that. Two or three days. (P3)

Category B-Occupational Stress

Several themes and sub-themes emerged under the category of *Occupational stress*. The questions were framed from the literature review regarding topics on management style, stress, day to day experiences, and traumatic events. The volunteers described what they considered occupational stressors that impacted their psychological wellbeing. The respondents provided a variety of answers that I coded within this category. The first theme was *perspective of management* which consisted of 2 sub-themes *ineffective* and *effective*.

The next theme was *day to day experience* which encompasses volunteer's views on what it is like to be a law enforcement officer on a day-to-day basis. The sub-themes that emerged were feeling *highly stressful, internal department conflicts, managing the perspectives of the uniform, management of personal and professional life,* and *handling administrative tasks.* The third theme is *traumatic events* at work with emerging sub-themes *crime scene* and *dealing with armed subjects*. Lastly, the volunteers shared various *acceptable emotions at work* with sub-themes *empathy and care, no emotions, objectives over emotions*.

Theme 4. Perspective of Management

Most of the respondents were mixed on their feelings about management. The respondents presented both pros and cons about working with various supervisors throughout their careers. The respondents offered objective and subjective perspectives based upon their personal experiences with upper management. These perspectives became the sub-theme *ineffective* and *effective*.

Sub-theme 4.1: Ineffective. Respondent P1 described his agency's management structure as a hierarchy controlled by a group of 2-3 individuals at the top who use a "tyrannical approach" to run "every aspect of the department." He added "it's very, very ineffective." Respondent P10 added that his agency "micromanages everything that you do" and makes him feel like he isn't trusted. P10 further explained it is ineffective because "it's very frustrating, it's very stressful, you just want to put in your 12 hours and go home."

Respondent P4 expressed how inconsistencies complicated his workflow due to having, "four different lieutenants, bosses in the last two years and every single one of them had a different management style." Respondent P11 affirmed ineffective management in his agency because they are "all over the place." According to P11, deputies are overwhelmed because they are expected to do "the job of 9, 10 deputies." In addition, P11discussed unsound promotional processes where co-workers are being promoted to manage positions they have never worked. "You got people that's never worked the field or people that worked in a correctional facility, trying to tell you what to do out here on the road." (P11,2022). As a Captain, Respondent P13 acknowledged that

there are inconsistencies within management that cause confusion. According to P13, some supervisors will attempt to be your friend, some will be too busy, and some won't make themselves available to manage what needs to be done. "You got different managers with different agendas or how they want to handle different things. It doesn't coincide." (P13, 2022). Respondent P2 expressed working alongside "very autocratic" supervisors who manage according to the notion, "you do this because I tell you to." P2 believes that this approach "hurts the troops, they feel that they're not heard, they feel that communication is broken, they feel that their voice is useless."

Sub-theme 4.2: Effective. Respondent P7 identified his agency's management approach as a "para-military management style" which he considers it very effective because "we're law and order. we follow orders, we enforce the law." P6 describes the militaristic approach subjectively effective and ineffective. He adds "you can pound your fist, and… make people fearful of you" but it is not sustainable. P10 added micromanagement, "make[s] sure things get done" but also creates a great deal of stress on the frontline workers who are taking the orders. Respondent P2 shared that her "leadership style is mentoring and transformational, working collaboratively with my subordinates." P2 acknowledges that this approach focuses on investing in the younger officers with encouragement, training and coaching because they are the future of the agency. Several participants expressed that a transformational approach and support for the frontline workers is an ideal work environment.

Table 6

Perspective of Management

Themes	Sub-themes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
4. Perspective of management	Ineffective	12	I think it will probably be more of a group, tyrannical approach, where you have maybe two to three, that essentially are responsible for every aspect of the department. And a lot of times, if you are not at that higher level of the hierarchy, a lot of the things that your voice is kind of minimized, in a lot of instances... I will say that it's very, very ineffective. (P1)
	Effective	9	It's just more a para-military management style… In a police agency in the agencies that we're law and order, yes, very effective. we follow orders, we enforce the law. (P7)

Theme 5. Day to *D*ay *E*xperience

The next theme "day-to-day experience" allowed the volunteers to describe their daily experiences on the job. The sub-themes, that emerged out of this theme were, *highly stressful, internal department conflicts, managing the perspectives of the uniform, management of personal and professional life, and handling administrative tasks*.

Sub-theme 5.1: Highly Stressful. In every interview, the volunteers agree that the profession is highly stressful. Respondent P2 shared her role as an administrator is stressful because of the balance she has to manage between, "…working against deadlines, staff shortages, … checks and balances, … training and upkeep" while also feeling "worried" about her officers having everything they need. She further added that these demands cause her to work longer than 40 hours a week and causes her schedule to become "very erratic." Respondent P10 described his day to day experiences as mentally

draining and "it takes a toll on you, …it follows you like when you get home." P5 added that stress is not secluded to the duties of the job but also enters the relationships in and outside the department. P5 described the anxiety of having "…issues with maybe a supervisor or maybe with a teammate, or having problems at home, so the stress can…[compound] every day that you work."

Sub-theme 5.2: Internal Department Conflict. Moreover, volunteers shared that they experienced internal conflicts within the department ranging from poor relationships with supervisors, observing preferential treatment of undeserving coworkers, organizational politics in promotional processes, fear of being backstabbed, and unfair discipline. Respondent P10 shared, "more of the stress comes from inside the department than it does from dealing with actual citizens for day to day activities." Volunteer P13 shared, "some people don't want the best for you, and are not on your team." P13 further stated that it is hard to trust the people she works with and "discern what type of person you know, these people are" because they "may be working against you or saying other things about you to other people,"

Sub-theme 5.3: Managing the Perspectives of the Uniform. Volunteers discussed their respective experiences at compartmentalizing their own emotions for the sake of managing the perspectives of the uniform. P3 described the difficulty in managing his professionalism when triggered on certain calls by what people say. One of his biggest triggers is when a person accuses him of profiling in the context of, "" you're doing this because I'm this, or… you're no different than any of them just because you wear this."" P8 shared the importance of changing the perspective on how African

American citizens view law enforcement. P8 feels obligated to work as “a role model to everybody” in distressed neighborhoods so that the perception of law enforcement can be shifted from “the enemy” to an ally. Respondent P4 explained that he didn’t like his supervisors and “got tired of working for assholes.” P4 applied for promotion so that he can provide support that he would have appreciated to his subordinates and “not be that guy.”

Sub-theme 5.4: Management of Personal and Professional Life. Several respondents found it difficult to manage their personal and professional life. Respondent P13 expressed the difficulty of managing the everyday stressors that tend to overlap personal and professional spaces is “not a good mix.” She further explained the tendency of “keeping everything inside or trying to deal with it, or do it yourself is kind of more of the mindset.” Respondent P7 described growing “numb” and “immune” to accidents and crime scenes where people are hurt. He explained that he loses the connection with feelings while on daily patrol with a mindset that “you just come in and do your job and then go home and then turn that switch of.” P3 shared that when he is off duty, the stress of the job makes him feel like he doesn’t want to be around too many people. While working in the field, he described “you have to be as professional…courteous, caring, and it's easy, but it's a tasking thing.” After returning home from work, P3 stated, “I'm just shut down… and at the drop of a hat, my kids will be loud or yelling or joking, and I'll just yell, can you guys just shut up?”

Sub-theme 5.5: Handling Administrative Tasks. *Handling administrative tasks* emerged from respondent’s statements about managing caseloads, meeting deadlines, and

taking care of the front-line staff. P4 describes the multitude of stressors he faces daily as a sergeant. He has upper management requests and objectives to meet, "hundreds of emails, training" along with "reading reports all day. correcting the reports" teaching officers how to improve their report writing. Respondent P5 is also an administrator who manages the training "deadlines that needed to get taken care of--hotels, doing the travel expenses, make sure they have their per diems." P6 described his stress he deals with comes from, "…looking out for my people, and making sure that my folks are in positions that, they want to be in, that they can thrive in."

Table 7

Day to Day Experience

Themes	Sub-themes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
5. Day to day experience	Highly Stressful	12	Draining. Absolutely draining. I wouldn't say draining physically, draining mentally dealing with the stress. Trying to think of a word, it takes a toll on you, like the stress… it follows you like when you get home, they say you leave it at the door. It's hard. (P10)
	Internal Department Conflicts	10	That autocratic mentality that hurts the troops, they feel that they're not heard, they feel that communication is broken, they feel that their voice is useless. (P2)
	Managing the perspectives of the uniform	9	A role model to everybody, you know, first off, but mainly, to show black kids that look like me, in reference to where I grew up to at least have a role model and try to change the perception of how we understand law enforcement, as you know, you see them as the enemy in the hood…" (P8)

Themes	Sub-themes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
	Management of personal and professional life	7	I think along with the stresses of the job, is when people's personal lives and issues, everyday things that happen in everybody's personal lives come up. And when those two coincide, it's not a good mix, and then the atmosphere of keeping everything inside or trying to deal with it, or do it yourself is kind of more of the mindset. (P13)
	Handling administrative tasks	7	Plus you have your administrative tasks, your training, your hundreds of email, your administrative things you have to keep up with. And in my job it's reading reports all day. correcting the reports. trying to have the officers get to a place where the report writing skills are as such that I don't have to do any corrections. (P4)

Theme 6. Traumatic *E*vents *a*t *W*ork

The third theme under category B is *traumatic events at work* which comprises of several types of traumatic experiences the volunteers have witnessed while on the job. The range of traumatic events include car crashes, decapitations, homicides, suicides, officer involved shootings, losing a coworker in the line of duty and witnessing the aftermath of these critical incidents. The sub-themes that emerged from this theme were *crime scenes* and *dealing with armed subjects*.

Sub-theme 6.1: Crime Scenes. Witnessing crime scenes created lasting impressions on the minds of the volunteers. Respondent P9 explained that in his 21 years of working in law enforcement, he has witnessed things “that the average person wouldn’t see on a regular basis.” P5 provided graphic details of crimes scenes he responded to a few weeks before this study. It is important to note that P5 shared this

story without pausing or complication while reflecting on the emotional trauma connected to this crash investigation.

> Well recently... there was a drunk driver hit a light pole,…broke the pole in half, entered a building,… the power lines were going across the road and downed a motorcycle… it was like 3-something in the morning and it was dark, and it cut his head clean off, I mean his head was clean cut off literally, and his head was in the middle of the road like he was covered in, like somebody at the beach and they cover your whole body up to your neck with sand, only your head is sticking out, and his body facing the road.

P6 shared that he has responded to multiple homicides and suicides but those crime scenes don't have lasting effects as "watching the effects of those left behind, you know, family members, fellow police officers, just witnessing what those folks go through."

Sub-theme 6.2: Dealing With Armed Suspects. Dealing with armed suspects entails police officers having to face suspects who possessed lethal and non-lethal weapons that can hurt or kill another human. Respondent P1 described being in gunfights and witnessing the volatility of protesters during George Floyd's murder. After working the frontline of the protests, P1 recalls "the most traumatic instance was seeing how many people were hurt and affected." P2 described the traumatic events from working undercover where she was kidnaped for 20 minutes before being rescued. Even more traumatic, P2 shared that to maintain the integrity of the investigation she "ended up having to pretend I have a warrant and they arrested me. I had to spend a night in jail."

Respondent P11 described, “I had a guy, I walked in and he was sawing his leg off, and this is like my fourth day on the road.” P6 described “I've had a partner of mine who was shot during a search warrant service, literally right in front of me, right in front of my own eyes.” P4 detailed events of a domestic violence call with a boyfriend who held his girlfriend’s 11-year-old child hostage with a knife to her neck. P4 shared how he attempted to negotiate with the suspect who was holding “a very large camping style knife to this little for about 20 minutes. Unfortunately, we had to shoot him and kill him.” In the process, “the little girl [was] stabbed multiple times but lived” (P4, 2022).

Table 8

Traumatic Events at Work

Themes	Sub-themes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
6. Traumatic events at work	Crime Scene	11	I think the most difficult part of the traumatic events have been watching the effects of those left behind, you know, family members, fellow police officers, just witnessing what those folks go through whether it is a homicide, a suicide, yeah the most difficult part of that is seeing what's left behind. And I've seen all those things, I've seen officers that have taken their own lives. People that have been literally shot and killed, laying in their own driveways and their family members sitting there screaming and crying. (P6)

Themes	Sub-themes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
	Dealing with Armed Subjects	9	So I took three people that were there and made entry into the house and confronted this individual who had a very large camping style knife to this little girl's throat. I negotiate with him for about 20 minutes. Unfortunately we had to shoot him and kill him. And in the process of us rescuing the little girl he stabbed her multiple times. We saved her life, she's doing fine but he is no longer with us. (P4)

Theme 7: Acceptable Emotions at Workplace

The fourth theme within occupational stressors addressed emotions the volunteers felt they were either allowed or not allowed to show while performing their duties. This theme invited the volunteers to share their perspectives on emotions that are deemed acceptable. Several sub-themes emerged from this theme, *empathy and care, no emotions,* and *objectives over emotions*.

Sub-theme 7.1: Empathy and Care. Many of the volunteers alluded to the importance of having empathy and care for the people being served in and outside of the department. In the words of P3, "I think you have to be caring. I think if you show people that you can understand and listen to them. Show that you really care. I think they'll be a little more receptive to that." P4 described how his perspectives about the job changed the longer he stayed in it. P4 stated that the more he invested in the community the more, "I actually cared about truth and justice and wanted to see people get the fair end of the deal and to give them good service you know as for the reason why they called."

Volunteers described the desire to help as being a stressor, P13 stated, "…you truly want to help every single person but it is physically impossible. So that becomes a stressor." P6 spoke about the culture within his agency that doesn't honor managers who show empathy to their subordinates. He shared that this culture is dictated by those at the top where, "those good leaders that will look out for folks, [and] will typically have the happiest employees working for them…are ostracized…made fun of… [and], literally ridiculed, behind their backs by their peers."

Sub-theme 7.2: No Emotions. The next sub-theme in this category was showing no emotions. Several upper managers in this study acknowledged that emotions are not acceptable. P2 describes, "…all of the places I've worked, there's always been a lack of emotion, it's almost engraved in you in this field that you're not allowed to be emotional." P4 added, "None! You're trained from the jump to be emotionless, to be strong and to not show weakness and that's not good…it's horrible. It will break you down." P6 described from an administrative standpoint how law enforcement leaders "can be our own worst enemy, [which] can result in some pretty terrible decisions being made.

Sub-theme 7.3: Objectives Over Emotions. The final sub-theme in this section was objective over emotions. Many of the volunteers described how important the mission and objective was over their own feelings. P10 described, "There's no room for emotion like you're given a task or given a duty, go out there and get it done. Like you can be emotional in your own time, it shouldn't be that way." Respondent P13 shared that although they are overwhelmed and experiencing high stress, the only emotions they

are allowed to show are, "Happy, joking, quiet, sometimes even indifferent, proud…" P3 discussed how their commitment to working has impacted their personal life,

> I want to be a dad and a husband. You know, it's kind of hard to do that when I'm at work every day. And I miss a lot of events, speaking in the last, I guess, six, seven years now.

P4 shared having to manage the internal conflict between their perspective and the cultural perspective of the agency, "Either you're with us or you're against us and that is not healthy when you're trying to have a balance and to serve a community with your heart."

Table 9

Acceptable Emotions at Workplace

Themes	Sub-themes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
7. Acceptable emotions at workplace	Empathy and care	7	The longer that I stayed, the more complex it became because I started, you know investing in the community in a way that actually, I actually cared about truth and justice and wanted to see people get the fair end of the deal and to give them good service you know as for the reason why they called. (P4)
	No emotions	5	"...all of the places I've worked, there's always been a lack of emotion, it's almost engraved in you in this field that you're not allowed to be emotional." (P2)
	Objectives over emotions	9	There's no room for emotion like you're given a task or given a duty, go out there and get it done. Like you can be emotional in your own time, it shouldn't be that way. (P10)

Category C-Mental Health Issues

An analysis of the respondent's views on the description of mental health issues comprises the following themes: The first theme is coping where respondents described their respective coping strategies to manage the stress of the job. Another theme was the volunteer's perspective on seeking mental health treatment. The third theme addressed how the volunteers viewed their agency's support of seeking help. The fourth theme, volunteers discussed what their agency can do to improve mental health supports. A multitude of sub-themes emerged from this section and provided details on how the volunteers managed their daily stressors.

Theme 8. Coping

Volunteers described coping strategies they used to help them manage their occupational and personal stressors. The sub-themes that emerged out of this section were *effective coping, ineffective coping, professional identity*, and *detachment*

Sub-theme 8.1: Effective Coping. Effective coping is described as any behavioral strategies proven by research to delay or counter the mental health deterioration caused by stress. One of the effective strategies is communication. Every volunteer in this study alluded to having a small and trusted network of supportive family and friends to speak with about their challenges. The opportunity to talk to someone when experiencing high stress, created healthy outcomes for these volunteers. P1 indicated that he relied upon a "small group of officers at my department" that he could go to "if I felt like I was losing touch and things were spiraling." P10 added that speaking to his wife was a benefit to his mental health but "…for the most part, I know she doesn't really fully understand." P6

discussed the mental health challenges he faced throughout his career which taught him to make stronger efforts to "talk a lot more…I was the first one to bottle shit up and just let it marinate… until things started spilling out involuntarily."

In addition, several volunteers referenced physical exercise or being in nature as effective coping strategies that worked for them. P13 shared "I like to walk trails and stuff when I'm off." P5 described hanging out in new places as a coping strategy that helped him to de-stress, "I'll go bowling by myself, or I'll go shopping, or I'll go to… try different restaurants" P3 shared how he speaks to himself as a way to mentally motivate himself to run in "90 degree heat, or… lift weights in the morning for about 30, 40 minutes."

Sub-theme 8.2: Ineffective Coping. Several of the volunteers practice coping strategies that they acknowledge are ineffective and temporary fixes to their occupational stressors. P10 shared that he does things like "work out, run, or play a video game but… those are just temporary fixes [because] my mind… goes back into that stress." P1 added, "To be completely honest, I do not believe that I have found a way to successfully deal with the stress that comes with this job." P5 discussed how he coped with his "rage" after receiving back to back calls for two homicide investigations,

> ...just the long hours and you know, to not think about it... and I know this is not right... but sometimes, might come home, take a couple shots, get a little buzz, go to sleep, wake up the next day, I'm good. Not even thinking about it, not even talking about it. If I have to discuss it, it don't even bother me so that's just, that's just, that's how I've been dealing with it for all the years.

P6 described that he didn't cope in healthy ways during his first years on the job and subscribed to the ideology that he was supposed to solve the problems and not have them. He further explained, "I really wouldn't deal with it, wouldn't talk about it. You just kind of tuck it away because that's kind of what we expect people to do right?" P9 shared that "I'm always working so we just get numb to it and then we fall into that rhythm and then it just becomes a part of me."

Sub-theme 8.3: Professional Identity. Several of the volunteers described managing their professional identity while in uniform. P7 explained his facade while at work, "I come in here, I put on a face and do my job and treat everybody fairly consistent with law. And after that, when I go home, I turn that switch off…" P13 explained the necessity of being aware at all times, "Awareness is everywhere, except maybe like in your house. At certain times, in your house, that's only about the time you actually relax." P9 described managing his identity as a game, "We learn how to play the game. We learn to survive… know[ing] when to say no, know when to say yes. Knowing who you talk to and what you say to that person."

Sub-theme 8.4: Detachment. Respondents discussed detaching from the on-the-job experiences while on or off duty to help them manage their stress. P10 shared that he tries not to speak to other police officers while off duty, "when I come home, I'm at home. I'm me, I don't want to deal with or even see anybody in the uniform." P5 shared that he is numb to the tragedies he has witnessed at work and he doesn't consider what he sees at the crime scene real to him. "I don't try to think about it because I don't want it to lay around in my head when I get off of work." (P5, 2022) P6 discussed the agency's

willingness to detach from police officers through termination without realizing, "the fact that, them being on the job was what damaged them to the point that we now feel that we need to throw them away… has always been a terrible thing to witness."

Table 10

Coping.

Themes	Sub-themes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
8. Coping	Effective Coping	12	I talk a lot more...I was the first one to bottle shit up and just let it marinate, if you will, until things started spilling out involuntarily...I make a really strong effort to talk a lot more. I talk to some professionals, which is something that I highly recommend. (P6)
	Ineffective Coping	10	I know this is not right... but sometimes, might come home, take a couple shots, get a little buzz, go to sleep, wake up the next day, I'm good. (P5)
	Professional Identity	12	I come in here I put on a face and do my job and treat everybody fairly consistent with law. And after that, when I go home, I turn that switch off (P7)
	Detachment	10	It sounds kind of bad, I try not to talk to other cops. Like when I come home, I'm at home. I'm me, I don't want to deal with or even see anybody in the uniform. (P10)

Theme 9. Perspectives on Seeking Mental Health Treatment.

The volunteer's perspectives on seeking mental health treatment yielded several sub-themes that involved fears ranging from *being judged, ego, being labeled as unfit and information being used against them*. The respondents shared stories to corroborate

the reasons behind their statement. The idea of a police officer asking for help is not a popular stance within the profession. Volunteers provided general observations of why police officers don't ask for help when struggling with mental health challenges. Some volunteers believe that not asking for help is based upon public and departmental perspectives that causes their silent suffering to lead to burnout.

Sub-theme 9.1 Being Judged. P1 shared that several fears prevent officers from asking for help, "I believe it's just the fear of losing status, the fear of losing financially. The fear of being judged by coworkers and supervisors." P10 discussed his perspective about asking for help, "We feel like we're out there 12 hours a day to help other people like, how would it look for us asking for help? In theory and our thoughts, it would make us seem weak for asking for help." P 10 further stated that this is the "…reason why most of us don't make it to 30 years and we get burned out." P13 described departmental perspectives highlighting, "The number one fear is, fear that you're going to lose your job. And then the fear of being perceived as weak or can't handle the job."

Sub-theme 9.2 Ego. Volunteers highlighted that it is a cultural viewpoint created by the para-militaristic tough guy approach. P7 described the cultural ego that is necessary to survive in law enforcement,

> …this is paramilitary…You have to exert that macho, masculinity, being tough, excuse my French, showing that you're tough badass, you're not afraid of handling difficult situations you're not afraid of dealing with the bad guys out there.

P7 further explained that if you didn't appear capable then, "...your peers will make fun of you. Otherwise, your peers will not like handling calls with you." P2 shared those officers with an "old school perception" are continuing to train, "Don't show weakness, being emotional and having feelings about things that happened to you on the job is a sign of weakness." P3 submitted his perspective of why officers don't ask for help "…because of pride, I think they're maybe ashamed, embarrassed." P4 indicated that no one wants other people to know "they have a disorder… they're going to see a therapist. they're on medication… because of the fear of what others may think about them."

Sub-theme 9.3 Info Used Against Them. Several of the volunteers described having fears that seeking help behavior would be used against them. P4 shared that police officers assume if they ask for help, "they're going to take me off the road, take my gun and put me on light duty." Similarly, P1 indicated in his interview, "there's this fear that if officers are too honest with some of the things that they're struggling with, they will be deemed unfit." Several volunteers provided examples where officers attempted to seek help and were seemingly punished for it. P5 described learning of another officer who committed himself to the hospital for mental health treatment. Upon being released from his hospitalization, he was let go by his agency because he failed to notify them. P5 recalls, "when other officers found out about that, I think it really kind of set the tone...yeah I think I'll be okay. I'll just keep this to myself."

Table 11

Perspectives on Seeking Mental Health Treatment

Themes	Sub-themes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
9. Perspective on seeking mental health treatment	Fear of being judged	12	The number one fear is, fear that you're going to lose your job. And then the fear of being perceived as weak or can't handle the job. (P13)
	Ego	11	I think it's just an old school perception, and it continues just because there are still officers training that way, that were trained by those types of officers. Don't show weakness, being emotional and having feelings about things that happened to you on the job is a sign of weakness. (P2)
	Info used against them	8	There's this fear that if officers are too honest with some of the things that they're struggling with, they will be deemed unfit. (P1)

Theme 10. Officer's View of Their Agency's Support for Seeking Help

The third theme focused on how the officer viewed their agency's support for seeking mental health treatment. Volunteers provided experiences that they either went through or witnessed other officers go through that influenced their perspectives about their agency's stance toward supporting mental health treatment. The sub-themes that emerged from this section of the study were *lack of trust, the agency is supportive*, and those who believe *the agency is not supportive*.

Sub-theme 10.1 Lack of Trust. The volunteers in the study described a strong distrust for their respective administrations for various reasons. Some volunteers didn't like the way supervisors handled discipline and subsequently didn't feel comfortable with

management discretion. P6 shared that the stigma surrounding mental health is still significant and administrators have a "knee jerk reaction" to question an officer's capability or "tuck them away…" when they ask for help. P7 described "there's a lot of distrust, I don't feel comfortable about using whatever it is that is offered by [my employer]" P10 shared that the fear of seeking help within a law enforcement agency comes from, "…a distrust of the administration, like you just don't trust them. So you just naturally assume that they're going to assume the peer support team as like spies to get information and get you out the door."

Sub-theme 10.2 The Agency is Supportive. Despite the distrust that many of the volunteers have for their respective administrations, many recognize the effort their agencies are making to provide mental health resources for their personnel. P6 expressed gratitude for the "employee assistance program" which he has leaned on and credited his city administrators and not his agency for promoting usage of that resource. P4 shared that he takes medication and sees his therapist weekly for the traumatic events he has witnessed over the course of his career. P4 discussed the importance of the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA). He learned about it and shared it with his coworkers to protect their jobs if they needed extended time off. He added, "do they have programs? Yes. Do they work? Yes. Does everybody use them? No." Other volunteers gave credit to the Employees Assistance Programs (EAP), Chaplains programs, Peer support, Crisis Intervention Team (CIT)Programs as great supports for mental health. P11 noted that he never went to EAP after the passing of his grandmother and best friend but, "…we do have CIT training, they helped me a lot."

Sub-theme 10.3 Agency not Supportive. Many of the volunteers identified the non-supportive ways that their agency manages mental health concerns of their personnel. P1 described that administrators would offer programs such as EAP, but it wasn't trusted. In his experience, P1 stated, "…it did not really feel like a genuine effort by the police department more so it was just a box checker." P10 shared that EAP is "frowned upon" and a "career killer… if you do that, and the PD finds out, they'll end up taking your gun and your badge and well, you can get a job at the post office." Other volunteers confessed to experiencing significant distress, and the interview made them feel better after speaking.

Volunteers discussed losing family members or going through divorce also created challenges for them personally on top of managing occupational stressors. P11 described feeling like he was dealing with depression after experiencing two significant loses, "I should have went and spoke with somebody. I lost my grandmother last month, my best friend… I didn't go speak to anybody. I fell into a stage of depression, but I was quiet and just dealing with grief." P4 described the typical dialogue for police officers who reject help when they were showing red flags relating to poor work performance. P4 recognizes when an officer isn't good and makes the effort to help by recommending services but they respond "I'm good I'm good I'm good" but he knows they are not because they are not happy.

Table 12

Officer's View of Their Agency's Support for Seeking Help

Themes	Sub-themes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
10. Officer's view of their agency's support for seeking help	Lack of trust	11	...a distrust of the administration, like you just don't trust them. So you just naturally assume that they're going to assume the peer support team as like spies to get information and get you out the door. (P10)
	Agency Supportive	8	So do they have programs? Yes. Do they work? Yes. Does everybody use them? No. That's kind of how it works. (P4)
	Agency Not Supportive	8	…it did not really feel like a genuine effort by the police department more so it was just a box checker." (P1)

Theme: 11. Improvements to Mental Health Supports

The volunteers of the study provided numerous recommendations on what police departments could do in order to make the process for seeking help less threatening to their livelihoods. sub-themes emerged from this theme. P10 shared in his interview that people shouldn't have any fears about reaching out for help. "I mean, you turn to a lot of bad and dark things, whether it be alcohol or drugs or even worse." (P10, 2022) He further described, "the worst feeling in the world is needing help and knowing you need help, but just being too afraid to ask for it, it's almost crippling." Several sub-themes that emerged from this theme were *increased support for patrol officers*, *mental health education*, and *normalize counseling*.

Sub-theme 11.1 Increased Support for Patrol Officers. The volunteers expressed a desire for frontline police officers who work in the field from day to day to receive

more support. Volunteers provided several recommendations that they believe would improve their quality of life within their respective agency. One consistent sub-theme was an interest in developing a genuine connection with the administrators and fellow coworkers. Several of the supervisors in this study provided their perspectives on what supporting patrol looked like. P2 indicated that her young officers “come to [her] and [she'll] get out and ride with them, work side by side with them…encourage, train, and coach them.”

P13 echoed that same perspective in her interview. While experiencing the distinction of being the first African American female with rank in her department, she finds it important to connect with female and minority officers, “…and make sure everything's going well for them at the agency.” P5 shared the successes he had while working as a supervisor over the Criminal Investigations Division (CID). He attributed the success to making, “… it a family-oriented division.” P5 explained that he learned about his staff, their families, and identified what they needed to be successful in the job. P5 added “the morale on my teams are super high and that's because the communication is there…” primarily because he utilized a transformational management style. Several volunteers acknowledged that when the frontline workers felt unsupported, they leave to search for a better work environment.

Some of the non-ranked officers in the study shared that they see value in using an hour of on duty time to either seek mental health treatment or perform a self-care activity. P7 shared that he would like, “to work out for one hour a day… on duty. That’ll be very beneficial, you know the benefits of physical activities that correlates with mental

health." P10 shared an unforgettable experience with a transformational supervisor who made him feel like his mental health came before the job,

> …he sat down, he talked to me, this job is stressful, this job will eat away at your soul. If ever you wake up in the morning, and you say you just need a me day, just send me a text message…don't abuse it.

P4 also added that upper management should allow frontline workers to have mental health days for the sake of "letting people rest."

Sub-theme 11.2 Mental Health Education. The next sub-theme that emerged was mental health education. Every volunteer shared that they didn't know as much as they should about mental health. Some mentioned only thinking of mental health as it relates to working with the public and not pertaining to police officers. P11 shared that he would be interested in learning more about how to manage grief, after losing his grandmother and close friend, "…maybe something centered towards grief should be more accepted within my agency."

P13 discussed the importance of acknowledging confidentiality in the mental health process but also seeking information on what the symptoms looks like, "I think if we were more aware of what's actually happening, instead of just trying to keep it quiet, then we could solve a whole lot more problems before they become out of control." P6 added that if he had the authority, "it would be education that would start at the top on how mental health resources can affect an individual's productivity, their happiness, relationships with family, and how that would have a positive overall effect on the

agency itself." P5 added, "if we can have more training on mental health. Cause we really don't have that much training on mental health, period."

Sub-theme 11.3 Normalizing Counseling. The next sub-theme was normalizing counseling. This theme was repeated throughout several interviews with respondents who acknowledged either they or coworkers needed support but were not comfortable asking for help. One way the volunteers felt that this can be circumvented was by streamlining the access to mental health material. P6 advised, "I think letting it be known that there are services out there and just giving that information out. Also have to be able to trust the information that's been given."

Respondent P13 shared that she often speaks openly about attending counseling in order to make it normal, "I'd like to see the stigma go away from mental health, like making it a norm to say, Okay, I have a therapist, and I go there regularly…it's just trying to make that more normal." P4 advocates that everyone should have a therapist, "…in my case I go every week. some people they get stuck and they don't know how to move forward and I think if they had a therapist that person could help them… And that's how it should be." P3 described his experience speaking with the mental health staff at his agency who comes out to critical incidents, "…it's just a pleasure to have a nice, friendly voice to talk to a lot if you need it, personally, that helps me a lot when I have someone just no judgement... And that's what pleases me the most."

Table 13

Improvements to Mental Health Supports

Themes	Sub-themes	Cases	Quotes from Transcripts
11. Improvements to mental health supports	Increased support for patrol officers	11	I make sure I have 99% of all my people have had training, of the training that they requested and training that I thought that was good for them, and the morale on my teams are super high and that's because the communication is there... (P5)
	Mental health education	10	I think if we were more aware of what's actually happening, instead of just trying to keep it quiet, then we could solve a whole lot more problems before they become out of control. Where there has to be intervention. (P13)
	Normalize Counseling	10	I think and just letting it be known that there are services out there and just giving that information out. Also have to be able to trust the information that's been given. (P6)

Summary

This research study aimed to explore what factors prevent law enforcement officers in the South-Central region of North Carolina from obtaining mental health services. To obtain the answers to this question, I collected data from 12 active law enforcement officers using semi-structured interview questions to conduct in-depth interviews. Every volunteer provided answers to the interview questions by describing their perspectives, emotions, and experiences. Their responses were broken into three categories represented in the literature: beliefs and training, occupational stressors, and mental health issues. There were 11 themes that emerged from the literature and the

study. In addition, a total of 34 sub-themes emerged that addressed more specific factors that answered the research question.

Participants discussed their motivation for becoming police officers and the subsequent stressors they experienced after entering the profession. Several of the volunteers expressed distrust for their administration and coworkers due to ridicule, backbiting, and the disconnect they experience with their managers. In addition, many of the volunteers suppressed their emotions and were either numb or detached from feeling anything. Several admitted to experiencing psychological distress from both the emotional and social precariousness within their department and managing their duties while in a state of burnout. Despite facing significant stressors, the majority of volunteers were not comfortable seeking mental health treatment because of the fear that the effort to seek treatment would be used against them.

In Chapter 5, I will restate the purpose and nature of the study and why it was conducted. I will provide an interpretation of my research findings and discuss this study's limitations. Recommendations will be made for continued research. Chapter 5 will conclude with an explanation of the potential impact on positive social change that this research study can have on the mental wellness of law enforcement officers.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This qualitative study aims to examine factors that hinder law enforcement officers from obtaining mental health treatment when they begin experiencing emotional discomfort. Qualitative research captures perspectives and narratives from interviews and case studies that categorize data into themes (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). This study will begin to fill a gap in the literature by examining factors that prevent law enforcement officers from obtaining mental health services. This qualitative study may lead to the discovery of emotional wellness interventions (McDevitt, 2020) that law enforcement trainers can include in basic law enforcement training programs.

Introduction

The data analysis revealed that many police officers fear the backlash of administrators who may not understand how mental health treatment helps restore a person to a healthier state of mind. Most volunteers were taught not to acknowledge their emotions during their Basic Law Enforcement Training. Participants further explained that trainers provided limited information on mental health topics during their academy experience. After the academy training, veteran officers guide rookies during their field training experience from a space of having no emotions, understanding that emotions get in the way of completing the objectives. This phase of the rookie's training leaves them uninformed and misguided on managing the signs and symptoms of their mental health deterioration.

Subsequently, officers struggling with mental health believe they have limited options for seeking help. Acknowledging emotions is frowned upon by veterans, who are

often administrators that foster a cop culture which practices detachment from emotions. In this chapter, I provide an interpretation of the findings, an overview of the study's limitations, my suggested recommendations for future research, and the implications of this study's results.

Interpretations of Findings

Numerous studies have provided data to determine what decision makers can do to support our frontline workers regarding stress and its impact on law enforcement personnel. I acquired the findings of this study from interviews with the respondents who are active police officers in the South-Central Region of North Carolina. I interpreted this study's results by analyzing each volunteer's response to the interview questions, the literature review, and this study's theoretical framework. This study confirmed much of what was found in the peer-reviewed literature because the literature aided me in formulating the semistructured interview questions for the interview protocol.

This study's subthemes provide insightful findings specific to the factors that prevent police officers from seeking mental health treatment. The presence of high stress, lack of mental health knowledge, distrust for management, avoidance of coping, and control of personal and professional identity were some of the factors that emerged in this study. To interpret the findings of this qualitative study and provide the reader with a visual of the data analysis, I provided a summarized table of each category, their respective themes, and frequent subthemes.

Table 14

Interpretation of the Findings

Category	Themes	Sub-theme	Frequency	Cases
A	Perspective before joining	Negative	21	8
		Positive	11	9
	Reasons for Joining the Force	To be helpful	19	8
		Bad Encounter	9	5
	Training	Zero hours	7	7
		4-8 hours	6	6
B	Day to day Experiences	Highly Stressful	106	12
		Internal Departmental Conflicts	61	10
	Traumatic experience	Crime Scene	29	11
		Dealing with armed subjects	12	10
	Perspectives about management	Effective	30	9
		Ineffective	67	12
	Acceptable Emotions	Empathy	15	7
		Objectives over emotions	22	9
C	Coping	Healthy	64	12

Category	Themes	Sub-theme	Frequency	Cases
		Avoidance	58	12
	Perspectives on seeking mental health treatment	Fear of being judged	44	12
		Ego	32	11
	Officer's view of their agency's support for seeking help	Lack of Trust	44	11
		Agency not supportive	26	8
	Improvements to mental health supports	Support for patrol officers	51	11
		Normalize counseling	42	10

Finding 1: Category A- Beliefs and Training

Category A consisted of factors that shaped the respondent's beliefs and skillsets to perform the job of law enforcement. Most volunteers identified positive and negative factors that inspired them to join the profession. Several respondents had experienced negative encounters with police before joining the force, inspiring them to become change agents within the profession. The volunteers' beliefs about the profession set the expectations for how they viewed the job and the people working there. Most volunteers desired to help others in need—this theme connected to the self-worth of the officers who looked forward to assisting people in resolving their challenges.

Every respondent was trained by a law enforcement academy yet held different viewpoints on how their training prepared them to manage on-the-job stress. Several volunteers indicated that their training academy did not provide them with any education on how to recognize or manage mental health symptoms. Instead, the pre-existing research shows that more emphasis is placed on creating a stress induced environment that tests a cadet's grit in order to weed out the weak links (Blumberg et al., 2019).

During their academy experience, the participants shared they were indoctrinated into a culture that taught them to avoid emotions during critical incidents. These standards are dictated by law enforcement trainers at the academy level (Blumberg et al., 2019). According to the literature, this training approach teaches that emotions will get in the way of completing the objectives (Blumberg et al., 2019). This conditioning evolves into suppression, detachment, and avoidance coping strategies that make it difficult for police officers to ask for the psychological and emotional help they need (Malmin, 2013). This norm was further reinforced during the participants field training experiences where they were trained by veteran officers who adopted avoidant coping strategies to manage their stress on the job. This training sets the cultural expectations and standards by which police officers learn to appraise the conditions responsible for their stress and emotions.

Once in the profession, the volunteers shared that the job was not what they expected for various reasons, which caused them to adjust their perspectives throughout their careers. The unmet expectations reflected the participant's feelings of dissatisfaction toward the profession. The volunteer responses highlighted occupational stressors like law enforcement controversies, internal departmental conflicts, law enforcement culture,

and lack of education on mental health as significant factors that caused their internal grief.

Finding 2: Category B- Occupational Stressors

Category B contained the respondents' perspectives on occupational stressors in the law enforcement profession and how it impacts their social and emotional wellbeing. The study achieved saturation in the sub-theme of *highly stressful* due to volunteers sharing similar perspectives about their internal work environment. According to research, occupational stressors are the challenges and expectations created by the authoritarian bureaucracy and environmental factors that law enforcement officers are expected to handle (Gutshall, 2017). This information is consistent with the results of the current study, where volunteers identified their administration as a significant cause of their stress.

Volunteers shared that veteran officers in leadership positions, and field trainers guided them from the mindset of emotional suppression. The literature identifies this mentality as the *warrior mindset*, which emphasizes resilience in the face of adversity by rejecting and denying any form of weakness through the suppression of emotions, pain, and trauma (Malmin, 2013). Suppression of emotions emerged numerous times throughout each participant's interview. Arguably it is understood that police officers need strong mindsets to perform their duties. According to Malmin (2013), the warrior culture consists of one’s ability to be resilient in the face of adversity. However, this mindset influences the subscription to unhealthy standards and practices. This mindset

not only intensified several participant's hypervigilance toward their management but also psychologically imprisoned them to an irrational fear of seeking help.

Previous research has identified how the cultural norm makes it difficult for police officers to ask for the psychological and emotional help they need (Malmin, 2013) because it would question their toughness. Hakik and Langlois (2020) stated that law enforcement culture stigmatizes any rhetoric on mental illness, impacting police officers' ability to do their job. Respondents shared their unique perspectives on turning off a "switch," "being numb," and having to detach from their personal feelings to remain professionally capable of performing their duties. The participant's detachment from their feelings was an unexpected learning experience that they needed to adopt in order to ensure career longevity. The learned detachment conflicts with the police officer's natural attachment to self-worth gained from a desire to help people in need. This behavior was confirmed in previous studies where police officers disconnect from others and adopt unhealthy beliefs from the organizational culture (Luhman & Nazario, 2015).

Several respondents found it challenging to manage their personal and professional lives. This validates the research, where the mental and emotional routines of the job become habituations that can carry over into the officer's personal life (McCarty, 2019). Many volunteers described the overlap of stress between personal and professional roles, which may make them emotionally unavailable to their loved ones. According to researchers, law enforcement suicide, alcoholism, use of force, heart attacks, and high divorce rates are indicators of unaddressed social and emotional problems that build up over time (R. Carleton et al., 2018). Several of the volunteers have

experienced divorce or shared that they experienced days where they yelled at their children or found it challenging to be with their family after working their shift. This is a coping strategy that worked for the individual respondent but not their family members who desired to spend time with them. This coping strategy is not only a byproduct of not feeling safe to ask for help but is potentially connected to the stress caused from suppressing their emotions over an extended period.

According to R. Carleton et al. (2020), frontline workers experience elevated pressure and anxiety from having to prove their value to administrators and coworkers. The volunteers described compartmentalizing their feelings about their challenges and having to remain professional while keeping their problems to themselves. These are behaviors that police officers adopt for the sake of protecting their careers within the departmental shame-based culture. This creates a conflict between agency and police officer values when frontline workers don't feel supported by their administration (McCarty et al., 2019).

Most volunteers from the study discussed feeling unsupported and not having an empathic connection with their management. This perspective contributed to the distrust experienced within their respective department. Distrust of coworkers and administrators was another unexpected aspect of the job that many volunteers encountered following their law enforcement training. All of the volunteers shared that to appear as if they cannot handle the job would be information that the administration would use against them to justify termination, suspension, or modified duties because it would be deemed a liability. The research highlighted that it is a supervisor's responsibility to be in tune with

their officers and recognize any mental health symptoms that can be addressed with agency policy and protocols (Miller, 2007). This is impossible if frontline workers and supervisors are at odds or do not trust each other. Personal vendettas and differences between superiors and frontline workers create discontent within the work environment (Luhman & Nazario, 2015). This is one of the most significant discoveries made from this study that highlights a factor that prevents police officers from seeking treatment.

The volunteers in the study were widely concerned about how other police officers would judge their fitness for duty if they were to seek help. This ideology is represented in the cop culture literature, where it is deemed unreasonable to need help if police officers are trained to assist others (Hakik & Langlois, 2020). Participants highlighted divisiveness among police officers who operate within their chosen departmental cliques. According to the participants, these silos speculate discrediting or disparaging information on police officers' not in their group. These rumors become a distraction in the work environment that cause a hypervigilance that produces high stress. As a result, neither the administration nor fellow officers are trusted due to the abovementioned behaviors, which suggest that officers within the same department are on different teams.

Volunteers shared that this work environment breeds distrust especially when supervisors form bonds with specific staff or bend the policy for coworkers whom they shared a friendship. Participants described their presumptive fears of being backstabbed or sabotaged by fellow employees. This fear created hypervigilance for many volunteers who became unsure of which coworkers would try to backstab them, sabotage their job

security, or block their promotional opportunities. Unfair discipline, inexperienced supervisors, and managers who control the workflow by dictating how they want specific tasks performed summed up respondents' high stress.

McCarty et al. (2019) noted that police officers want to feel a part of the process of achieving the agency's mission, however, communicating orders from the top-down without accepting feedback or providing support through dialogue causes frontline workers to experience burnout and depersonalization. The research identifies autocratic leadership as threatening to the social safety and autonomy of subordinates who consider this environment hostile and stressful (Guo et al., 2018). Many volunteers acknowledged that their agency operates from a hierarchal structure where the communication typically comes from the top down. The managerial approach was categorized by the volunteers as "tyrannical," "micromanage," "very autocratic," and "para-military." Participants articulated how this approach robbed them of their autonomy. However, respondents found these approaches to be both ineffective and effective for various reasons.

Many volunteers considered the abovementioned supervision style effective because it was mission-driven and ensured the frontline completed the tasks. On the other hand, this management style was also deemed ineffective because it was insensitive to the high-stress challenges that police officers work through daily. Volunteers experienced work environments that required them to work against deadlines while being short-staffed, do more with less, adjust and adapt to inconsistent managerial approaches. This confirms what the literature describes as organizational factors that contribute to high stress (R. Carleton et al., 2020). As one volunteer stated, managing these duties daily "is

not sustainable" because it does not consider the job's mental and emotional wear and tear.

Despite the abovementioned challenges, one respondent summed up, the only acceptable emotions were "happy, joking, quiet, sometimes even indifferent, proud" (P13, 2022). From a law enforcement cultural standpoint, emotions that shine a negative perception of the profession are not accepted. Volunteers acknowledge that the people they serve need them to help with their problems. This expectation creates a belief that the volunteer cannot have any personal issues getting in the way of helping the citizens who call for services. The research validates that this unreasonable threshold leaves no margin for error and perpetuates the assumption that an officer has to be perfect (Lucas et al., 2012; Papazoglou et al., 2020) regardless of their ability to cope with daily stressors. If the officer feels any negative emotions, the management will expect them to manage those emotions on their own time. The research identified that officers are expected to maintain a high level of performance and be mindful of their on and off duty behaviors as a sworn police officer (Lucas et al., 2012). The participants acknowledged knowing that citizens need their help and their commitment to being an inspiration to someone is what keeps most of them motivated to remain in the profession.

Finding 3: Category C- Mental Health Issues

The volunteers shared numerous thoughts on mental health issues they experience daily. In addition to the challenges the participants faced internally with their respective agencies, they witnessed crime scenes consisting of homicides, suicides, car crashes, assaults, or abuse cases against vulnerable populations. Some volunteers encountered

armed subjects with hostages, experiences that posed imminent threats to their life, self-mutilating suspects, or witnessing a coworker being shot. These experiences qualify as direct or indirect exposure to traumatizing events where death or severe injury was experienced (Hakik & Langlois, 2020; MacIntosh et al., 2015), which is the definition of PTSD. PTSD is a mental health diagnosis in the DSM (Marshall et al., 2021).

The respondents shared they had been exposed to traumatic experiences by which they could be considered for the diagnosis of PTSD. Although all of the respondents have faced traumatic events and also discussed symptoms like, avoidance of triggering factors, numbing with mind and mood-altering substances, lack of sleep, increased irritability, and higher levels of hypervigilance (MacIntosh et al., 2015), most of them did not seek therapy. Research shows, that police officers suffering from PTSD tend to under report their condition which create inaccurate statistics (Marshall et al., 2021). This places administrations and health professionals at a disadvantage in supporting officers who may remain silent to preserve their fitness for duty.

Several participants described the detachment from their emotions or imagining that the scene is "not real" to complete the investigative tasks and prevent the crime scene from affecting their psyche. Some respondents acknowledged these symptoms as problems they worked through by numbing and avoidance behaviors, while others shared it was a part of who they have become. Despite experiencing the abovementioned stressors, the volunteers expressed that it was not safe to communicate their emotions openly.

Every participant described traumatic events and mentioned experiencing powerful emotions that they either detached from or didn't feel safe communicating. As mentioned previously, this detachment is aligned with the irrational beliefs about masculinity within the law enforcement culture that leads to maladaptive strategies for coping. Several of the participants shared stories about taking time off or not performing their job while on duty due to the various dissatisfactions they held with their agency. According to Papazoglou et al. (2020), officers who struggle with moral injuries avoid aspects of the job that are triggering by taking sick leave, seeking a role in another unit, or suffer in silence with low job satisfaction and desires to quit.

Considering the results of this study, it is evident that stress is a significant factor that police officers must manage, yet many are not equipped with the education on how to do so. The participants found various ways to cope with stress organically or through research. Some volunteers participate in regular therapy with a licensed mental health professional, and others utilize life coaches, peer support, EAP, or a trusted support system to communicate their internal challenges. All of the volunteers acknowledged speaking to someone they can trust, like a close friend, spouse, family, or other people who have relatable experiences is helpful. However, many do not practice communicating their challenges as openly as they suggested in this study. For example, participant (P10) who advocated strongly for speaking to someone also identified seeking EAP support as a "career killer" which reinforces the distrust for agency resources.

Some volunteers resorted to drinking alcohol to help them forget about the stress or trauma they had witnessed and reported feeling better the following day. This is

consistent with the research that describes police officers utilizing cigarettes and excessive consumption of alcohol to self-medicate their stress (Bishopp et al., 2020; Elovainio et al., 2015; Hakik & Langlois, 2020;). The literature indicates that police officers utilize these coping strategies to avoid, numb, and relax the hyperarousal triggered by their duties (Elovainio et al., 2015). These coping strategies are counterproductive to a police officer's mental wellness because they do not resolve the stressors. Other respondents alluded to using healthy coping strategies but acknowledge that the stress returns once the activity is over.

Several volunteers admitted to denying any psychological or emotional challenges until it started to grow worse. Despite the distrust the participants have for their agency, many of them acknowledged that their agencies are doing more to support police officers seeking mental health treatment. Many of the participants highlighted the resources that their respective agencies are marketing. These resources include the Chaplain's program, peer support, EAP, or CIT training. Several of the officers considered the CIT training ideal because it was a general education on mental health and did not target police officers. Several participants advised that they found the information provided in the CIT training helpful in their job and personal life.

Volunteers also held additional perspectives about increasing support for officers while on duty. Volunteers shared that they wished their agency supported their mental health by allowing officers to have an hour to work out or do something to support their mental health. Volunteers said they would like to build a better connection with their administration by learning about their lives and families. Some administrative

participants shared that they try to work alongside their staff to show them that they support their work to build rapport. Other volunteers believed that the administration needs to be more educated on mental health so that the top-down influence can be empathic and informed. All the volunteers indicated that they didn't have as much knowledge as they would like on mental health to manage it better.

Finally, volunteers shared that they would like to see counseling normalized. Many volunteers agreed that counseling is a great idea and those who need it should take advantage of it. A few volunteers indicated that they are either in counseling or have taken advantage of it in the past. Volunteers agreed that the stigma is still strong primarily because of the culture. However, several officers described the culture as changing with the retirement of veteran officers who are not supporters of seeking help.

Theoretical Framework

Hakik and Langlois (2020) stated that the mental health condition of police officers will cause them to avoid people, places, and things that are connected to their triggers. In this study, respondents identified that their jobs were highly stressful. For stress to be legitimized, the respondents identified situations that included people, places, and things. An example of people would be the veteran officers and administration within the agency. The place would be the work environment where contact with both veteran officers and the administration would occur. The things are the law enforcement culture and respondents' subscription to its beliefs. These factors are appraised by the participants and their ability to cope will determine how well they manage.

The findings of this study were analyzed using the framework provided by the Lazarus Theory of tress and coping. The Lazarus Theory emphasizes that people appraise stress based on how they think and subsequently feel about a situation that causes the stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Appraising stress and coping are unique to individuals' beliefs about past experiences. The Lazarus theory highlights the relationship between stress factors and individual efficacy in managing those stressors.

The rationale for using the Lazarus theory is to process what stress factors police officers appraise and the coping strategies they use. According to the Lazarus theory, primary appraisal involves determining whether or not the perceived threat is harmful based upon past experiences, an anticipated danger, or a challenge that the respondent can develop mastery of (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Further, the article describes that human relationships are harmful or beneficial depending on social and cultural environmental conditions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

Autocratic leadership

Research has shown how autocratic leadership creates threats and fears among subordinates who experience their environment as socially unsafe and stressful (Guo et al., 2018). Studies have shown that the academy experience is designed to weed out weak links using a para-militaristic approach in its curriculum (Blumberg et al., 2019). This style of training and management significantly influences the law enforcement culture (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). Participants in this study validate that the current law enforcement culture is manufactured by the para-militaristic style which has negatively impacted their mental health.

According to Guo et al. (2018), employees practice defensive silence, a coping strategy, to avert the threat of autocratic management. This perception of the autocratic management style is appraised as a threat to the social and emotional wellbeing of the participants. The volunteers in this study were conditioned to view the presence of compassion as weak during their academy and field training. As a result, many of the volunteers adopted coping strategies that aligned with the cultural subscription of emotional avoidance by working extra hours, consumption of alcohol, exercising, not speaking about their stress, to speaking to people they trusted. One of the reasons some participants didn't feel comfortable speaking to others is because the ego is difficult to explain.

Ego

The participants mentioned having to put on a face or act in ways that did not match how they truly felt, which led to experiencing internal stress. The results of this study identified the ego as a behavioral modification that kept the participant social and emotionally protected in their work environment. The ego presents itself as a defense mechanism or coping strategy that aligns with the expectations of the law enforcement culture (Karaffa & Koch, 2016).

The ego is also responsible for suppression and avoidant behaviors connected to the denial of emotions. It kept the participants safe from the work environment's judgment regarding fitness for duty. Based upon the participants responses, the ego of a struggling officer presents as socially desirable, people pleasing, stoic, competent, and capable while in the agency workspace or community. These behaviors are responses to

the hypervigilance as a form of survival mode thinking that must be active at all times while in the presence of their law enforcement peers. Remaining in this psychological state over a period of time can lead to burnout.

Subsequently, several participants identified a switch that became challenging to turn off even when they were safe in their homes off duty. This suggests that the repetitive rehearsal of the ego creates mental exhaustion that increases irritability which crosses over both on and off-duty experiences. With the ego active, suppressing and detaching from emotions is the only way to complete the job's objectives. Exposure to heinous crime scenes would leave any rational person psychologically haunted by those images of decapitations and homicides. Several volunteers did not trust that their administrators will empathize with their psychological distress following a traumatic crime scene investigation. The volunteers discussed being numb and not thinking of these events as real in order to work the case however they were required. Working long hours or drinking alcohol is how some volunteers have coped. These behaviors kept the participants busy or self-medicated. Others found a trustworthy network they communicated with about their challenges.

Fear of Judgment

The study's results identified fear of judgment as a significant factor that gets in the way of police officers seeking help. The cultural narrative taught during the academy that aims to weed out the weakest link also creates the fear of judgment. The environment is competitive; in theory, the academy seeks to qualify the most capable applicants for commencement. If the cadet is fortunate to complete the academy, then it is assumed they

are the best and not like the candidates who were weeded out. This standard follows them throughout their career and becomes the measuring rod for how they are validated. This understanding creates an expectation concerning performance which causes the cadet to become hypersensitive toward how fellow officers perceive them.

From a clinical viewpoint, this is learned anxiety that increases its hypersensitivity within the environments that are critical of the participant's performance. This internal behavior has the potential to evolve into negative self-talk and criticisms relating to feelings of inadequacy, low self-worth, and shame. Based upon the responses in this study, this is what participants developed their ego to mask while avoiding behaviors they will be judged by according to standards of cop culture.

Job Security

Several volunteers shared that they did not trust sharing their thoughts or feelings with others due to the concern that their administration will use the information against them. With the law enforcement culture as the standard, stress appraisal is connected to what the volunteers think their admin or other officers will believe if they request help. This concern is one of the significant factors that prevents police officers from seeking help. The fear of being labeled inadequate for a job that provides them financial security, medical benefits, a level of status, and pride makes the volunteer take precautions in what they say and do to avoid being labeled unfit for duty. Losing their employment status would be synonymous with the training academy's standard of eliminating the weakest link. The departmental non-progressive perspectives on mental health creates a

trickledown effect that causes frontline workers to suppress their feelings to protect their social safety and job security.

Lack of Trust

Participants described confiding in a small circle of trusted officers and avoiding others. The volunteers shared their perspectives on a tendency to make fun of other coworkers who might display characteristics or actions that are unbecoming of the law enforcement cultural standards. In addition, observations of likability, departmental friendships, and bending the policy to accommodate an officer, impacted how the participants viewed social safety in their work environment.

Several participants provided stories that painted a picture of their departmental distrust. Participants discussed how they disliked their management or had disagreements with supervisors regarding unreasonable discipline or undesirable reassignments. Based on the stories, it is fair to speculate that these administrative actions trigger gossip concerning its reasonableness. This observation becomes a learned behavior that sends a message to the observers of what not to do. This was highlighted when one of the respondents shared that they had learned about an officer who was terminated because he sought mental health treatment without notifying his agency. The participant stated that incident taught him to keep his problems to himself.

Limitations of the Study

In every research study, some limitations are expected, and this study is no different. The study findings may not be relevant to law enforcement agencies that are already incorporating adequate mental health education and acceptance of mental health

resources. This study used information provided by participants aged 35 years and up. Based upon age, these individuals had more lived experiences than police officers entering the profession in their 20s. However, despite well-documented categories, themes, and subthemes, what emerged in this study may not be relevant to all police agencies and officers.

Another limitation is the participant selection process. I utilized a purposive selection process that included participants from various agencies in the South-Central region of North Carolina. The size of the participant's agencies was unknown and not a focal point of this study. The agency's size impacts accessibility to resources where larger agencies are more funded than smaller agencies to incorporate mental health education and training. Each participant seemed genuinely interested in sharing their experiences and perspectives, which provided rich details on the factors that get in the way of seeking mental health treatment. Considering this willingness, it is probable that the participants in this study may reflect some inherent bias against their administration, which can lead to limited transferability of the current findings.

Recommendations

Future Mental Health Training and Education

One recommendation from this study is the need for more mental health education during the academy and throughout the police officer’s career. The theory is that if mental health is added at the beginning of the officer’s training, it will be aligned with the law enforcement cultural expectations. Mental health training should equal the amount of time applied to the physical or firearms training that police officers receive. The only

difference is that firearms and physical training are directed at an outside target while an officer's mental health and stress is internal. This recommendation is an ideal consideration because if an officer is expected to use up to lethal levels of force, they should also be educated on how to manage the aftershock connected with that event. It is also assumed that the events leading up to a lethal force encounter placed that officer in a traumatizing life or death situation. If a police officer doesn't know how to manage these traumatic events cognitively, it can exacerbate psychological impairments connected with symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, depression, and maladaptive coping.

Future Recruitment Considerations

Several participants in this study shared that they came from impoverished backgrounds and those experiences influenced their desire to become police officers. People from underserved communities experience social and emotional developmental delays that can create inter and intra-personal challenges for the individual (Cavanagh, 2008; Hussong & Chassin, 2004; Moorey, 2010; Snyder et al., 2015; Wingo et al.,2015). Several police officers in the study experienced at least one divorce and have worked for at least two agencies at the time of this study. Although this study was not focused on divorce or switching employers, these outcomes may be indicators of childhood factors or developmental limitations in officers who ultimately commit egregious acts or create liabilities for themselves and their agency.

Psychological testing should be complemented with counseling sessions to explore a law enforcement candidate's background. Things to consider are the candidate's behavioral history in middle and high school. The adverse childhood

experiences survey would be another ideal assessment to determine if the candidate has prior exposure to any trauma. This information is important because it will reveal any preexisting challenges that can be rectified with mandatory counseling during the cadet's BLET.

Normalizing Counseling in Law Enforcement Culture

Participants acknowledged the pros and cons of the law enforcement culture. Acknowledging emotions was considered a weakness that also produced the fear of being judged by others. All participants shared that talking to someone they trusted was highly effective at helping them manage their stress. Several participants acknowledged that speaking about their experiences during the interview was helpful. Law enforcement administrators and trainers must implement individual or group counseling during the academy and throughout the officer's career to normalize the management of emotions. The participants of this study acknowledged that average citizens do not experience the types of calls for service they witness, nor will their loved ones understand how they must prepare their minds daily to manage the rigors of the job. Police officers must have access to a mental health professional for the sake of improving their emotional and social intelligence. The recommendation for seeking a mental health professional should not be viewed as leverage for rendering a police officer unfit for duty, rather it should be a supported process that works to help the officer manage their fitness for duty.

Implications

It is conceivable that the methodology used in the training academy evolves into what eventually breeds cop culture and the subsequent sub-themes relating to irrational

fears and distrust of the administration. For the cadets who make it, the effort to avoid being categorized as the weakest link potentially crosses over to the anxiety of being labeled unfit for duty. Several participants shared that their academy experience taught them to suppress or deny their emotions. This behavior confirms the cultural aspects of police work, where the assertion of feelings are a weakness of a police officer's identity (Malmin, 2013).

The stress factors that were the most significant were the perceptions of management, distrust for co-workers, fear of judgment, and management of the ego. The interviews revealed that participants had to suppress their feelings to avoid judgment. Participants had to put on a façade, avoid showing negative emotions, meet objectives without emotional excuses, and deny their internal challenges to accommodate others needing help. Each of these represents a form of denial, which seems to be a common coping strategy that proved detrimental to their own social and emotional needs.

The positive social change for this study begins with the upper-level managers of law enforcement personnel recognizing the value of the frontline worker. Administrators are the key to the improvement of law enforcement mental health. Frontline workers desired to feel appreciated and valued, often missing under an autocratic leadership style. Participants of this study shared their desire to experience a more transformational leadership style that develops followers into leaders.

All the supervisory participants described formulating personal connections and grooming the next generation of officers to take over leadership roles within their agency. In addition, respondents spoke about creating accommodations that allow them to take a

breather while on duty or have a mental health day built into their schedule. Volunteers shared stories about coveted supervisors who coordinated these opportunities to help them de-stress. The volunteers expressed great appreciation for the consideration.

Law enforcement agencies can implement policies that outline options for police officers to manage their mental health. Encouraging regular visits to a mental health professional who understands the culture or provides department-led self-care resources may create interest in normalizing wellness. The literature sufficiently documents that an officer with a better level of mental fitness will be more effective at performing their duties when interacting with the community they serve (Weis & Inwald, 2018). In addition, police officers armed with cognitive tools can confidently manage their emotional and social intelligence once they receive adequate training.

Conclusion

It is common knowledge that the responsibilities of a police officer require a rational mindset. This mindset becomes compromised over time after experiencing internal conflicts within the agency and traumatic events. The most significant finding of this study is the distrust participants held for their coworkers. This distrust precludes their willingness to seek help for fear that the agency decision makers will use the request as leverage to question their fitness for duty. As a result, many participants embraced avoidant or emotional detachment to maintain some resilience while on the job. This study validated much of what was already in previous studies. The occupational stress factors identified in this study produced a fear of judgment and the tendency to practice unhealthy coping.

The inability to trust coworkers and supervisors adds layers to the survival mode thinking that officers rely upon while patrolling the community. The stress created from this hypervigilance can layer from call to call, shift to shift, year to year, and eventually become mentally debilitating. Burnout materializes in the police officer's professional workspace, and if left unaddressed, it invades their personal life. Law enforcement leaders can counteract this fear by adopting a transformational approach to managing their frontline workers. The participants of the study widely embraced supervisors that were open to building quality relationships. Law enforcement agencies should be proactive in supporting police officers by providing them with proper mental health training and resources. Access to mental health resources in a job that produces high occupational stressors should be mandated to aid the personnel. Mental health professionals specializing in law enforcement culture should partner with law enforcement agencies to render mental health workshops and services throughout the year. In addition, law enforcement agencies should partner with mental health professionals to address the current mental health gaps in the training. Mandating the training or counseling sessions would eliminate the fear of judgment that gets in the way of the officer's willingness to seek help.

Law enforcement trainers can make this effort by adding more time to mental health blocks on stress and psychological disorders with a co-facilitation approach between law enforcement and mental health professionals on the subject matter. The law enforcement training academies should have mental health sections specific to work environment challenges. Some of the training topic considerations that emerged from this

study were grief and loss, managing burnout, managing healthy connections, and coping strategies for trauma. Police officers are trained to protect and serve the citizens of their respective jurisdiction. There are situational challenges that the academy trains officers to overcome. Stress is a debilitating challenge that police officers must be trained to manage to remain fit for duty.

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Appendix A: Complete Interview Protocol

Opening Statement

It is a pleasure to meet you __________, my name is Kareem Puranda, and I want to thank you for participating in this confidential research interview. The main objective for today is to learn more about your thoughts and experiences surrounding the factors that prevent police officers from seeking mental health services. Our discussion will be virtual and audio recorded. You have been provided the interview questions (IQ) in advance of our meeting today. You were also provided the Walden University consent to participate and have agreed to participate in this interview.

I want to reiterate and emphasize that your specific responses and identity will be confidential and solely used for the purposes of this study. For your privacy and security, an alphabet and numerical pseudonym will be attached to the transcription of your interview responses. To analyze the data, I will be creating a summary transcription of your audio recording and I can provide you with a copy of this anytime if you wish. I have designed the interview around some specific factors that we will follow as sections of the interview. The various factors I will be asking about are job related issues, occupational stress, and mental health issues.

The plan today is to work our way through these questions; however, I may ask some follow-up questions in the moment to learn more about the perspectives you share. The interview will likely take about 45 minutes. Before we begin, I would like to make sure that you are situated in a safe space where you can communicate confidentially. It is also important for you to know that we can stop the interview at any time for you to take

a break or handle something urgent that may arise. Do you have any questions regarding anything I have shared? Thank you. If you are ready to get started, I would love to hear a bit about how many years you have worked in law enforcement, what is your current position, and how old are you. Thank you so much for that, let's move into the first topic.

Body of the Interview

Topic one: Beliefs and Training

To ease into this topic, I want to start by asking your perspectives about law enforcement prior to working in the profession. There are no wrong answers. While you are talking, I will be listening, but I may ask additional questions to gain a deeper understanding about what you are sharing.

1. "What are your reasons for becoming a law enforcement officer?"
2. "What topics were covered in your Basic law enforcement training?"
    i. Possible prompt: "How many hours were devoted to mental health?"
3. "Now that you are a police officer, can you tell me about your experiences on the job?"
4. "What kinds of traumatic events have you witnessed on the job?"

Topic two: Occupational Stress

Moving to the next topic, I am going to ask about occupational stressors. I want to open it up for you to describe what types of things cause the job to be stressful.

1. "How would you describe the management style in your agency?"

i. Possible prompt: "For example, is the administration more authoritative, autocratic, bureaucratic, transactional, laissez-faire, democratic, or would you describe it in another way?"

2. "How would you describe the stress in your job?"
3. "How do you cope with job-related stress?"
4. "How do you let other people know when you are not feeling your best emotionally?"
5. "What emotions are acceptable in law enforcement?"

Topic three: Mental Health Issues

In this section, I will be asking you about your perception of mental health and mental illness within law enforcement.

1. "What does mental illness mean to you?"
2. "How does your agency support your mental health?"
3. "What can your agency do to improve mental health support for its officers?"
4. "What are your thoughts about police officers who seek mental health treatment by visiting a therapist?"
5. "If you experienced mental health concerns, how would you feel about visiting a therapist for treatment?"
6. "Why do you think police officers do not seek mental health services when needed?"
7. "We are nearing the end of the interview; Is there anything else you would like to add regarding this topic?"

Closing Statement

________________, I thank you for the time you have taken to complete each section of this interview. I want to highlight your important contribution to this study as it will contribute to the body of research aimed at supporting our law enforcement officers. I think I have everything I need, and want you to know that I will use the confidential recording to transcribe the data to the best of my ability; however, would it be alright to contact you if I have any clarifying questions? Would you like me to send you a copy of the abstract when published, so you can decide whether you would like to review any part of the full dissertation? Thank you again.

Appendix B: Flyer

Research study seeking sworn police officers to participate in virtual interview regarding factors that prevent police officers from seeking mental health support.

There is a new study called "*What factors prevent law enforcement officers in the South-Central region of North Carolina from obtaining mental health services?"* Law enforcement is a high stress occupation that takes a significant toll on the mind and body. This study could help healthcare providers like mental health professionals better understand how to support police officers' fitness for duty. For this study, you are invited to share and describe your perspectives about seeking mental health support.

This virtual interview is part of the doctoral study for
Kareem C. Puranda,
a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

About the study:

- One 30-60 minute virtual interview (audio recorded)

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- Sworn and active police officer in the South-Central region of North Carolina
- English speaking