

LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
WORKPLACE STRESS

by

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Abstract

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Law enforcement officials have a grand responsibility placed upon them. In a general sense, that conscientious duty is explained as serving and protecting the community. However, these officers are exposed to a wide variety of stimuli that lead to desensitization or feeling absent or unattached, which can further lead to their view of the general public being altered. This occurs at an early point in their careers due to the nature of what they are subjected to, as well as the frequency and intensity of what they see. Therefore, this research explores the effects of strain and perceived stressors of the field of law enforcement on its dedicated officers via semi-structured interviews and analysis.

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## **Introduction**

From a psychological standpoint, to become desensitized denotes becoming less likely to feel shock or distress during eventful circumstances that would typically generate such a reaction. This could be due to the frequency of traumatic events over time, the intensity of those events, a combination of the two, or the addition of countless other factors that may appear to be unrelated. What sparked this interest was a conversation with an officer with nearly 15 years of experience in the field of law enforcement. He shared his experience of witnessing a recent suicide by firearm during a traffic stop with a vague lack of concern and nonchalance, as if witnessing something as catastrophic as losing a life in front of his very eyes was not a conundrum.

While speaking with this officer, he did not express that he dealt with psychological effects or any inner turmoil that may have been caused by the event. He was not required to submit to mandatory counseling. He was not given a grace period to take the subsequent few days off as personal time. He was not even given the recommendation to go home for the remaining hours of his shift. Instead, he continued with his daily assignments after he cleared the traffic stop because he was required to do so. It was then that the author questioned where his ability to simply brush off tragic events came from.

Law enforcement officers handle a great variety of calls for service on a daily basis. Some are routine, such as traffic stops and alarms calls. Others are out of the norm and have the potential of causing mental trauma, such as suicides, pursuits, long-lasting standoffs, fatality accidents, and other various serious calls. However, at some point, the psychological effect these calls once had is no longer prevalent. Therefore, this research investigates whether it is the

stimuli they are exposed to or simply the length of time on the streets that have a correlation with the officer's state of mind.

## **Literature Review**

The following explanation of articles attempts to demonstrate and support the alternative hypothesis of this research.

### ***Defining Stress***

Stress is often a difficult concept to grasp, yet it is commonly overused as reasoning for how an individual may be feeling. To explain, stress can be acknowledged as a negatively connotated disruption of homeostasis, which is the body's natural state on physical, psychological, and physiological levels (Persson & Zakrisson, 2016). Individuals attempt to cope with the effects of this disruption by either embracing or fighting the natural response of the body, which is the fight-or-flight response. When a person fails to remedy the depletion of resources that occurs when homeostasis is disrupted, overall tiredness sets in. This exhaustion can be physical and cause the individual to feel fatigue. It can be psychological, leading to loss of motivation and mental focus, as well as the heightened presence of burnout. It can also be physiological, in which the strain causes an imbalance of chemicals, such as cortisol, to be prevalent (Persson & Zakrisson, 2016). In this case, cortisol is perilous in terms of long-term effects on the suppressing of the immune system and heightening the risk of heart disease, among other illnesses.

***Perceived Occupational Stress***

Dick's (2000) study of the meaning of acute stressors recognized that the nature of police work is highly stressful compared to other career fields. This recognition became important after distinguishing between chronic and acute stress, arguing that acute stress results in greater strain on psychological and physiological levels and, in turn, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The author of that study utilized the self-reported accounts of 35 police officers and their experiences of distress in a counseling setting. This allowed for personal meanings to be revealed between experiences and reactions, rather than allowing the impersonal method of surveying to display the participants' natural coping mechanisms of protecting themselves from mental and emotional pain (Dick, 2000). Semi-structured interviews with deep regard for helping the participant by speaking one-on-one proved to be most revealing in terms of finding the meaning behind the reactions to subjective experiences in the field. After all, the focus must be on the origin of the stress in order to best understand the reaction.

A recent study that investigated the fatigue and burnout in police officers sees that the profession of law enforcement is associated with psychosocial hazards (Basinska, Wiciak, Daderman, 2014). Naturally, if an individual feels positively and has a constructive attitude, he/she will have higher motivation. However, the calls for service that an officer is assigned to often leads to negative emotions, resulting in a reduction in enthusiasm toward working. It is entirely likely for one who feels like this to emotionally disengage, whether it is a conscious or subconscious effort to do so. This is where the fine line between compartmentalization and desensitization comes in.

Ma, Andrew, Fekedulegn, Gu, Hartley, Charles, Violanti, and Burchfiel (2015) identify shift work as a strain on emergency responders, namely police officers. They also recognize the

different categories of stressors that law enforcement officers may encounter. These include the professional pressures that deal with administration, physical and psychological dangers from the calls and experiences they are exposed to, and a lack of support from the police organization as well as the general public. Depending on the personalities and coping styles, or lack thereof, Ma et al. (2015) show that an individual may fall to be a victim of these types of stressors and allow them to affect his/her personal life in a negative manner.

Referring to law enforcement, a level of anxiety is present when an officer is assigned to what is known as a "call for service" (Hickman, Fricas, Strom, & Pope, 2011). There are many unknown factors, even when the officer is on a call for service as seemingly habitual and routine as a traffic stop. For example, the mental state or capacity of the driver is unknown, along with the uncertainty about the possible presence of drugs, alcohol, and/or weapons. Initially, the officer has no method of understanding whether or not the driver will cooperate with his/her commands and is at a heightened sense of awareness until potential threats can be assessed. This type of anxiety is known as state anxiety. Prolonged periods of time in this state or increased frequency of the triggering of state anxiety traditionally progresses to the development of trait anxiety, which is typically a trait carried by an individual and becomes an element of his/her personality. In this way, Hickman et al. (2011) recognize the impacts strain can have on an officer's personal life as well as the quality of service he/she gives to the public. The recognition is prominent due to work life bleeding into the family life despite all best efforts of compartmentalization. The attitude one may have at work will become part of the attitude he/she has at home.

These attitudes are furthered by exposure to critical incidents. These are characterized as situations in which a life is at risk whether it is the officer's or the citizen's. More often than not,

they result in the use of lethal force either by the police or against the police. Therefore, this is a dangerous source of acute stress that occurs for a relatively short amount of time in a shift, in comparison to the rest of the 8-, 10-, or 12- hour shift that tends to be menial and often boring. These critical incidents do not necessarily result in harm to the officer experiencing the situation (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2013). Instead, the threat of harm or witnessing the harm to others can be just as impactful as the harm itself.

Chopko et al. (2013) also identifies stressors that an officer experiences on a daily basis. These include, but are not limited to, a lack of support from other officers and coworkers and the constant validation that is required by supervisory personnel for every action taken in the field. There is a punishment for every minor infraction that, cumulatively, can be detrimental to any hopeful furthering of one's career. Written reprimands are on record and must be disclosed to future potential employers. At the same time, there is little to no recognition for good job performance, which leads to demotivation and low morale (Chopko et al, 2013).

As mentioned previously, the majority of a shift may lack activity until an emergency arises that takes up a mere fraction of the day. Smaller departments and rural agencies share this similarity (Page & Jacobs, 2011). This can lead to quicker desensitization, considering that an officer can expect to display their fight-or-flight response during a shift, but they have no idea as to when that response will be needed. Therefore, they spend their entire 8 hour shift on edge and prepared to engage an offender (Page & Jacobs, 2011). Seeing as how there are only two or three officers on the streets at one time, they are spread relatively thin in order to patrol the entire city and respond to all calls. This isolation from each other results in a lack of communication between officers until it is time for briefing at the end of the shift.



Law enforcement officers that work for smaller agencies, as well as rural departments, have an added burden placed on them. They are likely to be knowledgeable about the residents and business owners and likely have good rapport with them (Page & Jacobs, 2011). While some consider this aspect to be beneficial, officers see that they must enforce the law on friends and family members, creating tension in their personal and social lives.

### ***Impact of Perceived Stress***

Both the critical incidents and various minor occupational stressors lead to an expected change in mindset if not treated carefully. Small departments allow for a close-knit feeling among its workers, which leads to greater support and higher morale (Chopko et al, 2013). In the same respect, a larger department will consist of supervisors with a greater number of responsibilities and a smaller amount of time for tending to the growing emotional or psychological needs of their subordinates. Regardless of the department size, the general subculture of law enforcement overrides one of the most basic coping mechanisms of humans by discouraging one to seek help. A stigma is inflicted, portraying that an individual is weak or less than others if he/she requests assistance, even if only to air his/her grievances and not necessarily obtain medication. This impedes that natural tendency to express emotion and contributes to depression, burnout, and cynicism (Chopko et al, 2013).

The vast majority of law enforcement officers feel the need to bottle their emotions. While there is increasing understanding for soldiers coming back from war to have PTSD and other stress and anxiety disorders, it is not a thought in the forefront of the average person's mind that an officer may be having adverse reactions to the traumas they experience as well. Instead, there is a stigma among law enforcement that seeking assistance for mental health is weak. The

psychiatrist is seen as a checkpoint to pass in order to go back to work, rather than a tool that can be utilized for the bettering of an officer's mind and wellbeing. Therefore, the issues are never worked through or explored, and the officer continues to bottle the experience. A study found that this compartmentalization of feelings contributes to isolation and secrecy in the attempt to achieve what they believe to be mental self-protection and preservation (Terpstra & Schaap, 2013).

In order to combat the effects of officers' perceived stress, they will resort to the means of coping in which they have created through personal experience in the field without thought. Predictably so, cynicism becomes second nature to law enforcement officers, as well as the mistrust of outsiders and the development of what is referred to as gallows' humor. In this way, Terpstra and Schaap (2013) discovered that there must be a focus on hobbies outside of police work. Otherwise, social isolation among police officers and pessimism about their opportunities grow.

Unfortunately, much research is limited due to the reliance on self-reported stress (Hickman et al, 2011). Therefore, those with PTSD and other debilitating disorders, as a result of exposure to calls for service on the job, are likely to choose not to subject themselves to the interviews, questionnaires, or other research measures that could cause them to relive memories that are painful or unpleasant. Understandably, they would not wish to force themselves to confront a past event and trigger an emotional or other episode for the sake of talking about their sources of stress.

Investigating these articles led to a furthered interest in examining the perceptions of and reactions to the everyday experiences of law enforcement officers who work/worked patrol in

local agencies. Such officers respond to a variety of calls every day from traffic stops to thefts to suicides to fires and so much more. This has been hypothesized to affect the mindset of officers as well as their personal relationships.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research offers opportunities to study officers' perceptions of workplace stress in a more productive and intuitive manner in place of quantitative methods such as surveys or questionnaires. One of the advantages to studying active or recently active (in the last five years) law enforcement officials is that the experiences are most likely to be at the forefront of their minds. Qualitative methods allow the exploration of mental and emotional triggers as experiences are uncovered. By allowing participants to discuss their own experiences and mindsets, a deeper understanding of their perceptions of workplace stress can be developed, which is generally difficult to capture with quantitative methods.

## ***Sampling Strategy***

The data for the current study were acquired from semi-structured interviews with 14 law enforcement officers from multiple agencies in Texas. Law enforcement officers were defined as individuals who have had experience in law enforcement within the last 5 years. All respondents are employed or previously employed by a law enforcement agency in Texas. Respondents were all Caucasian males ranging in experience from 7 to 33 years.

Participants were recruited via e-mail through the use of snowball sampling. Due to the author's employment as a police dispatcher for the Pantego Police Department, the principle investigator was able to identify a police officer with extensive connections within networks

comprised of law enforcement officials. This individual, whom the researcher has known for over one year, served as the gatekeeper. Using the informant's connections, the researcher was able to communicate with officers with a variety of backgrounds and experiences. The informant assisted in clarifying the research objectives to potential respondents and validated the interviewer as non-threatening in terms of mental, emotional, and/or physical means. At the end of each interview, the interviewer asked respondents to provide referrals of other law enforcement officials who may be willing or wish to participate. Most were reluctant to offer further referrals. Several gave referrals with the preface that they may not respond due to the sensitive nature of the interviews, stating that those who have experienced traumatic events will not likely explain their experiences and scenarios for this purpose.

### ***Data Collection***

The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in an informal manner. This produced a more cooperative and free-flowing environment, allowing the interviewer to guide the content and order of questions in a method that was most conducive to each respondent. Questions were added or negated based on the rapport that was continually being built. In order to achieve greater comfort levels, interviews were conducted in a closed room, and respondents were promised confidentiality. Lastly, each participant was assigned an alias to be identified by in order to protect the true identities of the individuals.

The interviews were conducted over a three-month period beginning in March 2016 and ending in May 2016. They were audio recorded and were approximately 30 minutes to an hour in length. The recordings were then transcribed within a week of the interview and subsequently destroyed. After consenting to participation and being recorded, respondents were asked

questions about their background, such as how they became interested in law enforcement, how long they have been working in law enforcement, and what titles and responsibilities they have held. The interviewer requested information regarding the general views the respondents had of their job, of the general public, and how that mindset may have changed or not throughout their careers. Lastly, the respondents were asked to reveal the calls for service, if any, that solicited mental, emotional, or physical reactions that would have stayed with the officers for any duration of time.

### ***Coding Method***

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using inductive and deductive coding methods. According to Patton (2001), computer analysis is unnecessary and can interfere with the analytic process. Therefore, analysis began with reading the transcripts over and over. Open coding was utilized, which allowed the distinction of different ideas and categories of data to be cultivated (Given, 2008, p. 581). Each interview was examined based on the content discussed in hopes of identifying common emerging themes. Participants spoke of a number of stressors and the effects of such stressors on their mindset throughout their careers. The data were coded and classified into five categories. Table 1. shows the initial major categories identified through open coding and the associated concepts through which the accounts of officers were identified.

Table 1. Major Categories of Research Study

Major Categories	Associated Concepts
Reflections of the beginning	Fast-paced work versus tedious boredom, wanting to help others
Detachment	Must remain unemotional, distanced from family and outside friendships
Family influences	Shift work leaves little to no time for family, cannot talk about work to family
Coping mechanisms	Drinking, extramarital affairs, gallows' humor
Repercussions from exposure	Feeling anxious, conditioned responses to protect themselves

## Results

The following sections share the accounts of officers as they relate to the major categories that were discovered through open coding.

### *Reflections of the Beginning*

The mindset and personality of a person at the beginning of his/her career is rarely the one that survives to the time of retirement. This is because the more one looks at others' lives and affects them, the more one is internally affected. To start, officers shared their perceptions of the job when they first began:

I hate to use the word naive, but you're 22 or 21 years old, and you're dumb... You go to the police academy and you think you know everything when you get out... Then the

first thing out of your FTO's mouth is to forget all the shit you just learned in the academy. And they say, "Here's how we do it" (Henry, 16 years of service).

With the variety of calls that officers are assigned to, the investigator found that a large portion of their shifts are spent waiting for the fast-paced and adrenaline-inducing calls, while the majority of time is realistically reported to be uninteresting and tedious.

When I first got into this job, I had the outlook that it was going to be chasing people, getting in pursuits, and we're gonna be in gun battles all the time and how much fun that would be. But in reality, you know, that's all exciting, but it only lasts for a couple minutes, and then you're drowned in paperwork for the next 5, 6, 8 hours, you know. People just don't realize that (Adam, 15 years of service).

One participant talked about waiting for long periods of time and not knowing when these intense events will happen:

We train and train and train for these escalated events, but they really only happen 2-3% of your entire career. They're these moments of ramped up time that could be anything from pursuits to shootings to whatever. You spend all that other time ready for events that just don't happen (Edward, 8 years of service).

### ***Detachment***

The law enforcement officials who participated in this research study had a unanimous opinion about their work in terms of creating distance between themselves and their feelings. Every call they are assigned to is just a call and the effects that come after its clearance are simply a part of the job. Frank, with 10 years of experience in law enforcement, stated, "I think it's important to stay neutral, you know, and have the mentality that officers are supposed to

have.” They must emotionally detach themselves in order to execute their best skills in the manner that they were trained. An officer of 7 years, David, continues this thought by saying, “You have to be emotionless and you can’t take things to heart to a degree.” Others explained their viewpoints after exposure to traumatic calls:

So you detach yourself so you can do your job, so you can take the measurements and pictures, and figure out what the cause was. You’re spending hours in there with the sight, the smell, the sounds of the grieving so you have to detach yourself (Keith, 18 years of service).

Another spoke to the fact that there will always be more calls to follow:

I wasn’t really affected by other calls because you know that another is about to come right after it. I didn’t really care how it turned out. You work it the best you can and then it’s done and you go to the next one (John, 21 years of service).

While officers have a broad range of duties, there is only so far one has the capability to go in the attempt to achieve justice. They aim to do their job to the best of their ability, but are still criticized for not doing more.

“Well what’s gonna happen to that lady and her kids?” That’s not our problem. She had a fight with her husband, and she was kicked out of the house with nowhere to go. It’s not that we’re heartless. We’re not heartless. But that is not our job (Ian, 33 years of service).

After being asked how long they believed they were working until their mindsets and thought processes began to change, the answers ranged from one to five years. In other words, by the time an officer has approximately five years of experience, he/she is likely to have been



exposed to a number of traumatic events that would have affected his/her outlook of the profession, as well as the general public, leading the officer to become detached and desensitized.

After a number of calls, you make peace with tragedies, but the stress is always there. It really destroys your belief system, you know, what's right and wrong, the devil. I have no problem believing in the devil. I've seen his work. But it doesn't affect me the same way anymore (George, 32.5 years of service).

Wearing a uniform is cool. Carrying a gun is cool. Driving fast in a cool car with red lights and sirens- that's fun and cool stuff... But that quickly wore off because of reality. Happened in the first year probably. It wasn't that the job changed. It was that my eyes were opened to the reality of society. But, you know, I'm here to help and I'm here to protect (Brandon, 18 years of service).

### ***Family Influences***

Sacrifices in family life must be made because police work is unlike any other field. If an officer is late or distracted on their shift, the situation becomes full of risk very quickly. Therefore, birthdays, holidays, anniversaries and any other important days that are ideally spent with family members must be set as a lower priority. It is incredibly unfortunate to miss quality moments in a child's life or miss the celebration of achievements at parties, but every participant explained their family was affected in one way or another due to work. For example:

You don't get to go to all the musicals and programs. You miss movie night sometimes and you miss dinner. [My kids] know Dad's gotta work. They're resilient. They were

born into it. I mean, (laughs), they seem to handle it better than wives do (Henry, 16 years of service).

In another familial aspect, officers find it necessary and highly salient to compartmentalize their work life from their family and personal life. Often times, the officer may feel the need to vent their frustrations, but the relief they feel is only temporary due to the stress they have now placed on their family. Another possible outcome is that the spouse or significant other may now feel a greater urge to worry about whether or not his/her partner will come home every night after learning the danger or risk involved in particular calls for service. The gory and gruesome details of the shift's work are too taxing to bring home. Therefore, they must find separation between work and home life. A police officer explained:

It's important to be an actor. (Hand gestures) This is who I am at work. This is who I am at home. Trying your best to compartmentalize... My wife saw pictures of the fatality accident I worked a few days before, and she decided she didn't want a full-access pass to my experiences. It was too much for her, so that definitely instigated the whole, "Hi honey, how was your day at work?" "Fine" ...I knew not to talk about it (Brandon, 18 years of service).

A physical point was brought up by an officer regarding his change in clothing in order to separate himself on a psychological level:

You know, like, when you're on patrol and I leave the station, I don't really interact with the family until I've taken my stuff off and changed so that lets me know that I'm at home. I'm not at work. So when I pull in to the station, I regroup the same way (Keith, 18 years of service).

Nearly all participants were of the same opinion in this regard. However, those who differed were the ones who are able to talk to their families and significant others on a deeper level of understanding since they may be more sympathetic or accepting of the profession for a given reason. One officer explained:

Well my current wife was a police officer... So she gives me her opinion, even when it's not warranted (laughs), and my dad-or actually my stepdad gives me a lot of insight because of his [law enforcement] experience (John, 21 years of service).

### ***Coping Mechanisms***

It is not uncommon for law enforcement officials to internalize their issues. Since they often feel that they cannot talk with their families, other methods of coping are not so healthily chosen. A warped sense of humor, drinking issues, and marital problems tend to arise as coping and defense mechanisms so as not to truly admit what is bothering them. More often than not, a sort of gallows' humor is developed as a method of talking about the intense issues at hand while not showing negative emotional or psychological effects. All participants mentioned this in one way or another. To paraphrase, they interpreted laughter about tragedies, death, and danger to be the best way to disengage from the situation and cope. The following articulations were made:

There was a guy who- I guess he shot himself. I don't remember. There was brain matter in certain spots. Well when the call was over, we went back to the department and one of them said- Harry or whatever his name was, the guy that died- "I'm walking around with Harry's thoughts all over my shoes", you know, meaning his brain... You may see that as cynical, but I see that as an attempt not to be (Charles, 26 years of service).

Another agreed about developing a different kind of humor:

After all the years of handling it, you just deal with it as it comes. Yeah, you worry about it, but the constant worrying numbs you. You kinda have to laugh about things that normal people wouldn't laugh about, you know. You have a twisted sense of humor (Adam, 15 years of service).

After all, the stigma attached to getting help for emotional and psychological issues is a negative one. Seeing the department's therapist or counselor of some kind is viewed as a checkpoint to pass in order to return to work. For this context, a good shoot was clarified as a shooting in which the officer was justified for his use of deadly force in a given situation. The department had investigated the matter thoroughly and the officer's actions would have been cleared.

After a good shoot, in order to come back to work, we have to make sure his psyche is good. And so most officers go into [therapy] thinking, "I gotta beat the shrink, cause I just gotta go back to work." They don't actually allow themselves the moment to say, "Yeah this bothers me. This keeps me up at night" (Edward, 8 years of service).

A healthier outlook is to acquire a hobby outside of the world of law enforcement. Someone in this profession must cultivate and maintain friendships outside of the police department. Otherwise, the only thing that individual will do is related to work, whether it is spending time with friends from the department, being in clubs with other law enforcement officials, or filling every second of free time with off duty jobs.

It's important to realize you've got a life outside of law enforcement. If that's the only thing you do, that's a poor life to have. It's a poor substitute for a real life. I've seen it.

They'll drink. They'll engage in unhealthy behaviors like extramarital affairs (Chief Pippins, 33 years of service).

Although many stressed the importance of having a hobby or something to do outside of law enforcement, a few spoke of the nature of officers in a different way.

Well you're either a cop or you're not... There's a saying in a show or whatever and it's kinda cheesy but it's true. I'm going to misquote it but it's essentially saying that you're a cop because you don't know how to be anything else... (Edward, 8 years of service).

One furthered that thought by explaining that having hobbies may not always be so effective:

Golf, fishing, hunting too. Those things help. But when you spend too much time by yourself, all you think about is work, especially when you don't know anything else, like me (Henry, 16 years of service).

### *Self-Awareness*

An acknowledgement must be made in reference to seemingly unhealthy coping mechanisms that may serve a greater purpose. The officers stated that the use of a respectable amount of alcohol is advantageous to relaxing from the daily stressors from the workplace. On the other hand, while in the field, the public does not want to see an officer who cannot keep his/her composure on an emotional level. Citizens wish to see police as authoritative figures who can handle the pressures of any emergency situation they are called to. Therefore, the so-called twisted sense of humor that officers inherently develop can be seen as a positive factor. While it does allow them to laugh at unusual things, it also assists them in not breaking down emotionally in situations such as a homicide. One participant explained:

I joke. I never get depressed about what's going on. Don't get me wrong; some of this stuff is shocking. I just think being able to distance yourself and joke is healthier than stressing so much that when you're done and retire, you either suck the end of your pistol or you have a heart attack and I just don't want those things to happen (George, 32.5 years of service).

In the same respect, the detachment these officers experience may seem cold or heatless to the average person who is not in this field. However, this serves as a buffer for stress so as to not be so affected by it. The participants asserted a sense of self-awareness, allowing them to recognize the coping mechanisms they may or may not use and the benefits or shortcomings of that use.

### ***Repercussions of Exposure***

A realization came to the forefront of an officer's mind after responding to call after tragic call. He recognized that dealing with the stressors of the job and trying to feel how officers are supposed to feel is actually harder than the job itself because of societal expectations that are placed on police. He explained:

You train a soldier to kill people and break stuff...That's what military does. You get medals for it. You get a special place to be buried for it. You're supposed to enjoy it and say oorah. But police...we're not supposed to enjoy taking away people's freedoms. We're not supposed to enjoy the aggression, the violence. We're supposed to be really really good at it but we're not supposed to like it. You're supposed to feel regret (Nathan, 16 years of service)

After being exposed to a plethora of different tragedies, and so much internalization and compartmentalization has occurred, officers advised that they have no need for therapy. After all they have witnessed, there is nothing that bad anymore that they feel the need to talk about.

I've been covered in blood... I've seen legs torn out of their sockets. I've seen people as, to put it bluntly, road meat just laying there. I've done CPR on a guy where he was losing more blood from a gunshot than I was pumping through him and he died while doing CPR. I knew he died and I slept like a rock that night. Um, I don't know, it's weird... I took a good shower, got it all off of me, and then it was like it never happened (Lucas, 28 years of service).

Regardless of mindset at beginning of career, the majority of participants were forthcoming about their change in mindset. They self-reported to now be distant and unattached. They advised that everyone lies, and they are constantly and consistently seeing the worst qualities of the general public. No one calls 911 when they are in their best state of mind. Therefore, the officers must deal with frantic individuals who would not normally be acting in such a way. Because of this, law enforcement officials have a conditioned response to protect themselves. They report to be at an elevated level of caution and have developed a habit of watching the behaviors of others very closely.

When you clear a call, you're done with it, and you need to let it go. It changes you... I don't sit with my back to the door anymore. Ever. Um, anytime someone approaches you, you wonder what they want. You look at their hands. You look at their body... You see what they can hurt you with. You're very distant and detached... (Keith, 18 years of service).

Another agreed:

The more I got into my career, the more aware I became of the shit that was going on around me. So then instead of enjoying a dinner, just dinner and being focused on my wife, it was more like “What’s going on over there? What’s that guy doing? What’s that behind me?” That ultimately took its toll as far as going out and having fun (Brandon, 18 years of service).

Brandon went on to explain an interaction he had with an officer of only three months. His perception after such a long career and dealing with the terrible effects of the job was one that triggered an angry response when a rookie had worked extra time after his normal shift but did not log it or request payment for overtime. The rookie stated he was a company man and that it was okay.

I told him, “If I ever hear you say that again, I will punch you in the throat.” He kinda just looked at me all confused. I said, “Son, this job will steal from you more than it’ll ever give you back. It’ll cost you your health, marriages, relationships with your kids and friends. You put in for every extra minute you work... Get what you’re owed” (Brandon, 18 years of service).

Henry expressed that an officer has to deal with the fact that they will ruin the day of anyone they stop, whether the purpose is to give them a citation for speeding or to take them to jail for warrants or other violations.

Loud music call: you’re knocking on someone’s door. Speeding: you’re giving them a ticket. Stealing something: you’re taking them to jail... If it’s 7:30 in the morning and they’re on their way to work, you’ve only given them a verbal warning, but you ruined the rest of their day because you gave it a terrible start (Henry, 16 years of service).



***Events and Stories Shared by Participants***

The author was granted permission from participants to share the stories of events that were significant in some way or that triggered emotional responses. The following account was significant in an officer's career due to the realization of present dangers after the fact. He did what he felt was needed to be done in order to save a life, which included risking his own without fully comprehending that hazard. In a way, it influenced how he treated dangerous calls further into his career path, because he then recognized that he is not ten feet tall and bulletproof.

There were so many calls coming in one day because the city was flooding so bad. It was just raining and raining and raining. There's a lady in a tree next to a bridge. Not sure how you get in a tree, but, you know. Her car had been swept off this bridge and was down at the bottom. You could see the head lights through all the water. Well they tie a water hose to me. So I walk out onto the bridge and the water's just so strong. I lean over but I can't get her, so I think I can just stand on the railing of the bridge, grab her, and step back down. Well it actually worked... I got her to safety or whatever. We ended up saving 5 or 6 people from drowning that night around the city. Bunch of life-saving awards and whatever passed out. But the reason it affected me- I go back out the next day and all the water is gone and her truck is way down in the creek. Well the tow company is trying to get it out and so I look over the edge. It's like 35 feet down. And the tree is *not* close to the bridge, like at all. I have no idea how I reached her. It was so stupid to do what I did and it came so close to being really, really bad. I could've easily been swept away and drowned. But I didn't think about it in the moment, and I did what I thought I had to do, but yeah that was so stupid, dumb (Henry, 16 years of experience).

Another officer shared a multitude of events that he has responded to throughout his career. He discussed that he was not affected by what he saw, because he knew what kind of job he had, and he knew the types of things he would be seeing. He uses sleep as his main coping mechanism, as well as the thought that his job is purely reactionary.

I've dealt with kids. I've dealt with adults. I've dealt with people doing very cruel things to others and that doesn't bother me... The one I'm working on now is a man who set an elderly lady on fire while she was alive. I was involved in another case where the father basically butchered his young child, his pregnant wife, and her father, and then set the house on fire... Another one- I had forgotten about it until we're talking now. We had a call where three children had died and the firemen kept going in and out of the house and said they could not find any of the victims. So then we went in, the investigation team, and we found that the victims were right by the door. The firemen had been walking across the bodies the whole time and didn't know it... It's part of the job. I know that none of this is my fault. I'm here to help after the fact. I deal with it by sleeping and I grind my teeth. (Laughs) I'm afraid that one day it's all going to come back and land on me like a ton of bricks, but until it does, I'm dealing with it (Mark, 32 years of service).

The following entry is one that generated a response brought on by the connection between the personal and professional aspects of an officer's life.

When we were in the process of trying to have a child, there were times it wasn't fair. We tried so hard for years and we weren't successful. Well I was dealing with a socioeconomic class of people that didn't need to be getting pregnant, couldn't afford it... But it was kinda like they'd bump elbows and it'd happen. That's how easy it was for them to get pregnant. So I watched as this girl went through her pregnancy and she

used drugs and drank alcohol. She had thrown herself down the stairs trying to have a miscarriage, trying to abort... Then she had the baby. I was called out one night and the baby was dead, like dead dead. The mother had this flippin' fuck-it attitude like, "Well I don't know what happened." I was so pissed off. (Long pause) That, uh, really affected me... Turns out she was in this drug and alcohol induced stupor and just, you know... (trails off) (Brandon, 18 years of service).

Lastly, an officer brought up that he had to discontinue attempting to understand the relationships he sees. His job is to enforce the law on a daily basis. On one hand, there will always be those who disagree with the criminal justice system. However, he truly believed he was helping a situation when he interrupted a domestic disturbance in a family's home.

You have the domestics where the guy has shoved the lady's head through the wall and there's holes where she's went through them. And you arrest him but then she's mad at you. He has manipulated and belittled her and made her think she cannot survive without him so that is her world. That's where she gets her money, and who takes care of her. All those holes in the walls are her fault because she failed to be a proper spouse, failed to cook right, failed to do whatever in his eyes. So then it's her fault in her mind that all the bad stuff happens. Now you're showing up and causing conflict in the relationship. Where are they gonna get the money to bond him out? Because if he's in jail, he's going to lose his job, you know... After a few of those, you stop trying to understand. I can't understand (Keith, 18 years of service).

**Discussion/Conclusion**

In this study, the author explored the perceived stress of law enforcement officers through self-reported accounts. The thoughts of those officers were observed in reference to their mindset from the beginning of their career to the present day. Results of 14 semi-structured interviews advocate that their sources of stress come from family influences on the work life, the need for detachment and compartmentalization, a lack of healthy coping mechanisms, and the repercussions of exposure to traumatic events. The repercussions to intense calls for service over the span of an officer's career were explained to be extensive.

The investigator also recognized the outlook of participants who explained that the seemingly unhealthy coping strategies served more positive purposes than individuals who are not in the field of law enforcement may not understand. Drinking may assist in relaxation at the end of the day. For the sake of the public viewing officers, a different sense of humor may contribute to the ability to remain emotionally strong in times that would normally cause an officer to possibly shed a tear. Lastly, the public may view an officer as cold or distant, but it can be argued that detachment is the best way to ensure the officer is executing his/her best skills.

In general, the police officers estimated the length of the first one to five years to be the most significant in each of their careers. The calls that were most impactful were the ones previously defined as critical incidents and those that induced adrenaline. Overall, participants agreed that it is a combination of their time in the field, measured in years, and the intensity and number of traumatic events or critical incidents that yields the results that were found. Therefore, the investigator can make the decision that there some degree of correlation present.

**Limitations**

This study attempted to address limitations. However, like any research study, it is not free of limitations. The current known restrictions are that the interviews are naturally self-reported. Therefore, the participants may choose to embellish or negate information from their experiences that have the potential of contributing to the results differently. The results may not be representative of all local law enforcement agencies due to the method of sample selection being snowball sampling. Lastly, while the interviews attempted to evaluate how the stressors of the workplace affect emotional responses in personal and professional settings, the interview guide itself was developed by the principle investigator and has no previous research for its validity as an instrument.

Appendix A

Approved Consent Information Sheet

**University of Texas at Arlington  
Consent Information Sheet**

**Investigator:**

Karen St Valentine

**Faculty Sponsor**

Professor Arthur Vasquez

**Contact Number**

(817) 925-8869

**Contact Number**

(817) 272-0318

**Purpose:** We are conducting a research study called "Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions of Workplace Stress." The purpose is to increase the understanding of an officer's perception of stress in his/her everyday tasks and to examine what triggers may have enhanced a change in mindset since the beginning of his/her career.

**Description of Project:** Participants will be asked to answer questions about their backgrounds, experiences, and perceived stress. The interviews will take place on the University of Texas at Arlington in University Hall room #306. The interviews are expected to last 45-60 minutes. They will be face-to-face and audio recorded.

**Risks:** The risks for participation are minimal. Other than the possible discomfort associated with recalling negative experiences, no known risks are present in this study.

**Benefits:** Benefits to the participant are limited to the reward he/she takes from telling his/her stories and reflecting on those experiences.

**Voluntary Participation:** All individuals have the right to agree or refuse to participate in this research study. Individuals who consent to participate also have the right to change their minds at any point during the interview. Participants may tell the investigator that they no longer wish to participate. Refusal or withdrawal of participation will not involve any penalty.

**Inclusion Criteria:** Participants to be included in this research study will only include adult men and women who have experience as a sworn law enforcement officer. Since the research study is to gain a better understanding of the perception of workplace stress of men and women who are, or have been, law enforcement officers, individuals who are not, nor have ever been, law enforcement officers will be excluded from this study.

**Records of Participation in this Research:**

All of the information participants provide to investigators as part of this research will be protected and held in confidence within the limits of the law and institutional regulation. All interviews will be confidential. Audio recordings will be destroyed after the data are transcribed. Research notes will be coded and de-identified to ensure confidentiality is maintained, kept, stored, and locked in the faculty sponsor's office located in the University of Texas at Arlington (UH 306). No identifying information will be kept.

**Access to Data/Recording:** Only the investigator and faculty sponsor identified above will have access to the data/recording. Once the recording is completed, the investigator will personally transcribe the data. During transcription, the recordings will be kept, stored, and locked in the faculty sponsor's office located in the University of Texas at Arlington (Room UH 306). Once the recording is transcribed, it will be erased and destroyed. Completed transcriptions will be kept and locked in the faculty sponsor's office. The remaining anonymous transcription will be only available to the investigator and faculty sponsor identified above.

**Publications Associated with this Research:** The results of this research study may appear in publications, but individual participants will not be identified.

**Contact People:**

Participants who want more information about this research study may contact the investigator listed above.

IRB APPROVAL DATE: MAR 14 2016

MAR 14 2016

**University of Texas at Arlington  
Consent Information Sheet**

Any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-2105 or [regulatoryservices@uta.edu](mailto:regulatoryservices@uta.edu)

Your signature below indicated that you agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form

X

Participant

X

Date



Appendix B

IRB Notification of Exemption



OFFICE OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION  
REGULATORY SERVICES

**Institutional Review Board  
Notification of Exemption**

March 14, 2016

Karen Noelle St. Valentine  
Dr. Arthur Vasquez  
Criminology & Criminal Justice  
Box 19595

Protocol Number: 2016-0451

Protocol Title: *Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions of Workplace Stress*

**EXEMPTION DETERMINATION**

The UT Arlington Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, or designee, has reviewed the above referenced study and found that it qualified for exemption under the federal guidelines for the protection of human subjects as referenced at Title 45CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, either directly or through identifiers linked to the subject; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You are therefore authorized to begin the research as of **March 14, 2016**.

Pursuant to Title 45 CFR 46.103(b)(4)(iii), investigators are required to, "promptly report to the IRB any proposed changes in the research activity, and to ensure that such changes in approved research, during the period for which IRB approval has already been given, are **not initiated without prior IRB review and approval** except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject." All proposed changes to the research must be submitted via the electronic submission system prior to implementation. Please also be advised that as the principal investigator, you are required to report local adverse (unanticipated) events to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services within 24 hours of the occurrence or upon acknowledgement of the occurrence. All investigators and key personnel identified in the protocol must have documented Human Subject Protection (HSP) Training on file with this office. Completion certificates are valid for 2 years from completion date.

The UT Arlington Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services appreciates your continuing commitment to the protection of human research subjects. Should you have questions or require further assistance, please contact Regulatory Services at [regulatoryservices@uta.edu](mailto:regulatoryservices@uta.edu) or 817-272-2105.

**REGULATORY SERVICES  
SERVICES**

The University of Texas at Arlington, Center for Innovation  
202 E. Border Street, Ste. 201, Arlington, Texas 76010, Box#19188  
(T) 817-272-3723 (F) 817-272-5808 (E) [regulatoryservices@uta.edu](mailto:regulatoryservices@uta.edu) (W) [www.uta.edu/rs](http://www.uta.edu/rs)

Appendix C

Interview Guide

**Interview Guide**  
**Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions of Workplace Stress**

**Introduction to the study / interview:**

The goal of this study is to learn about your life experiences and your perceived workplace stress during your time as an officer.

**INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION:**

1. How long have you worked within law enforcement?
2. What titles have you had during your employment as an officer?
3. What was your last title?

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

1. How old are you?
2. Are you currently married or in a relationship?
  - a. How would you describe your relationship with your significant other?
3. Do you have any children?
  - a. If so, how many?
  - b. How old are your children?
  - c. Do they live with you?
    - i. If not, how often do you see your children?

**EXPERIENCES WITH THE LAW ENFORCEMENT SYSTEM:**

1. At what age did you join law enforcement?
2. What were your general views of law enforcement?
  - a. How do you think officers felt towards the public?
  - b. How do you think the public felt towards officers?
3. Has your view changed over time?
  - a. Possibly desensitized or numb?
  - b. If so, is it by choice or did it happen naturally?
4. When did you begin to feel differently about your perception of the job?
  - a. Was there a specific call or set of calls that triggered your attitude change?
5. Do you find that you have a lot of stress?
  - a. How do you cope?
    - i. Most stressful aspect?
    - ii. Least stressful aspect?
6. How does your stress from work affect your relationship with your family?
7. Adversely, how does your family affect the way you do your job?
8. In the past several months, media has shown a light on violence against officers. It's become very dangerous to be an officer because it's not uncommon to be targeted due to your uniform.
  - a. How does this affect you in general?

- b. Your attitude and emotions?
  - c. The way you handle even the routine calls?
9. Please talk specifically about what you deal with on a day-to-day level and your subjective experience (i.e., its affect, if at all, on you personally or others in your workplace).
10. Think back to a particular case that you worked on or heard about, that stood out in that it evoked an adverse psychological or physical reaction (however brief).
- a. What was your reaction, its longevity, and what was it about the case that led you to react the way you did?
11. Do you have any advice for a new officer?
- a. About coping with stress?
  - b. About handling emotional calls?

**CONCLUSION: (possible wrap up questions)**

1. Is there anything that you would like me to know about you or your experience that I did not ask?
3. If there was one thing that you would want me to remember / know about your life experiences, what would it be?
4. Or, what would you want others to know about the stresses of the job and how it affects your life?
5. Why did you agree to talk to me today?

**RECRUITMENT:**

1. Do you know of someone else that I could interview?
  - a. If YES: What would be the best way to contact them to conduct an interview with them?
  - b. If NO: Thank you for taking your time

Thank you for participating and allowing me to speak with you today. I appreciate your time as well as your straightforwardness and honesty. Everything that we have discussed today will be kept confidential.

Do you have any questions for me?

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### **Notes on author**

*KAREN ST VALENTINE* is a graduate student in criminology and criminal justice at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her primary research interests at this time include the effects of stress on law enforcement officials and the psychology of crime.

### **Notes on advisor**

*ARTHUR VASQUEZ* is a doctoral student in criminology at the University of Texas at Dallas and Senior Lecturer of Criminology at the University of Texas at Arlington. His primary research interests include juvenile delinquency, gangs, graffiti, neutralization theory, reality/choice theory, and ethnographic methods.