Major Research Paper

Building Resilience in Police Officers: A Literature Review

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# Building Resilience in Police Officers

Police officers perform a vital job in society: to protect and serve. In Ontario, Canada, police officers typically retire after 30 years of service (Parnaby & Weston, 2020). During these 30 years in the line of duty, police officers are exposed to a variety of traumatic events and experiences including death, abuse, violence, natural disasters, and many more. Their tasks are to enforce law and order and as a result, to protect civilians from witnessing these horrors. Police officers are taught to run towards danger. The cumulative exposure to traumatic situations can impact a police officer’s mental health, both on the job and in their personal lives. To combat this chronic and significant exposure to trauma, a critical skill for a police officer is resilience (Paoline, 2003).

## Research Problem

Research involving policing has often focused on stress and trauma. The field of resilience, particularly regarding law enforcement, is under-researched. This paper seeks to understand resilience, reactions to trauma, and how resilience can be built through training. The goal is to help police officers successfully manage stress and trauma while on the job and during retirement. This will be accomplished through a systematic review and analysis of the literature. This paper will focus on understanding the policing profession, its history, the modern-day experience, and life after policing. The key goals of the paper are to understand resilience, the current models used to build resilience in police officers, and what models are potentially beneficial. In addition, this paper will examine the field of post-traumatic growth and explore how to best support officers impacted by trauma, bOverall, the goal is to understand how to build upon the strengths of a community of individuals who put their lives at risk on a daily basis to protect and serve the public. Finally, the findings will be discussed, along with directions for future research.

# Background History

In 1791, Canada was divided into Upper and Lower Canada through the Constitutional Act. Untrained constables and high constables were held responsible for the small settlements that existed. This preliminary system of policing continued until the Confederation, which included the province of Ontario, was formed in 1867.

Modern policing is credited to Sir Robert Peel who created the Metropolitan Police in London, England. Canada’s police system was modeled after Peel’s vision. In 1873, the North-West Mounted Police became responsible for issues involving liquor, trafficking, frontier policing, and government relations with the First Nations people. The North-West Mounted Police would eventually become the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP, 2020). In 1875, John Wilson Murray became the first full-time police officer for the province of Ontario. The second and third Ontario detectives were added in 1884 and 1892, respectively. On October 13, 1909, the provincial police force was formed. The Ontario Provincial Police were responsible for investigating serious crimes, enforcing the Game Protection Act, promoting peace within mining communities, and guarding the border. In 1922, Ontario police officers were also tasked with enforcing the Highway Traffic Act. In 1939, Ontario policing continued to grow and reform itself as command was centralized, uniforms and equipment were standardized, and police orders were created. In 1963, in the increasingly modern world, Ontario policing again began to change. The command structure supported 17 districts of policing and training became a major priority. In 1974, women were first recruited to be police officers. The Ontario Provincial Police is one of the largest deployed police services in North America with more than 6,200 uniformed officers who police the province of Ontario, which has more than 12 million residents. The province encompasses one million square kilometers of land, 110 thousand square kilometers of waterways, and more than 130 thousand square kilometers of provincial highways (Ontario Provincial Police, n.d.).

# Literature Review

## Police Culture

Occupational cultures exist within many vocations. They are created through the reactions of members within a culture to a variety of situations and problems. Occupational cultures include practices, rules, rituals, and expectations regarding conduct (Stuart & Moore, 2017). Police officers deal with two environments: occupational and organizational. The occupational environment involves community work, while the organizational environment relates to officers’ experience with the formal police ranking structure. Police culture can vary based on policing organizations, members’ ranks, and individual officer styles (Paoline, 2003).

Banton (1964) and Rubinstein (1973) described police officers as “peacekeepers” rather than as law enforcement officers in some of the earliest studies on policing (Hazard, 1966). Jerome Skolnick (1966), a pioneer in studying policing and the police in terms of occupational culture, stated that police culture includes shared beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes that are ingrained in law enforcement organizations (see also Hazard, 1966).

Police culture has both positive and negative aspects. Police culture emphasizes solidarity, loyalty, and an “us versus them” mentality, which can lead to police officers distancing themselves from the public. These beliefs, Skolnick posited, can lead to prioritizing officer safety and group solidarity over individual rights or procedural justice. This culture also struggles with perceived threats to its autonomy or authority, which may be perceived as criticism or external oversight. Skolnick also described the positive aspects of police culture, including camaraderie and a sense of duty. To ensure democratic policing, police culture must include accountability, transparency, and respect for civil liberties (Hazard, 1966).

Skolnick (1966) coined the term “working personality” to describe the mindset, characteristics, behavior, and coping skills an individual uses, to adapt to the needs of their profession. This is seen particularly in high-stress work environments. Referring to police officers, Skolnick described traits of hypervigilance, assertiveness/decisiveness, emotional detachment, and loyalty/comradery. Hypervigilance is developed because police officers must have a heightened awareness of their surroundings and potential threats. This can help keep the officer safe but always looking for danger can create a sense of distrust in their communities. Officers need to be able to think quickly and make potentially life-and-death decisions (Skolnick, 1966). Assertiveness and confidence are required to be decisive. Police officers experience traumatic and stressful events in the line of duty, and they need to be able to compartmentalize their emotions to complete their job. The close working relationships seen in many police departments allow for a sense of support and understanding from colleagues, which helps manage the stresses associated with the job (Hazard, 1966). Police officers are often expected to be both emotionally and physically tough, which can lead to environments in which mental health awareness and treatment are not supported or encouraged (Hakik & Langlois, 2020).

## Impact of Policing on Law Enforcement Officers

Being a police officer is recognized as one of the most stressful professions (Violanti et al., 2017). Stressors in policing include operational/situation-inherent stressors (e.g., traumatic incidents, engaging with hostile civilians), management/organizational stressors (e.g., policy and procedures, inadequate training and pay) (Ungar, 2021). Shooting a person while on duty, seeing the death of another officer, experiencing physical/verbal abuse, witnessing child abuse cases, death of a child, critical incidents, workplace discrimination, strained relationships between fellow officers, and job dissatisfaction were found to be the highest stressors for police officers (Gershon et al., 2009; Violanti & Aron, 1995).

The intensity and frequency of the stressors must be considered. Stressors such as seeing abused or dead children, killing someone, seeing an officer die in the line of duty, situations requiring the use of force, and physical attacks were rated the most stressful. However, it is important to note these stressors have a low frequency of occurrence. Highly rated stressors that also occur frequently include family disputes, calls about a felony in progress, lack of cooperation between officers, making critical decisions in the moment, and being short-handed on calls (Violanti et al., 2017).

### Interpersonal Relationships

Organizational stressors create a challenging work environment, which increases the chance of burnout and results in psychological and physical difficulties. These stressors include the logistics of the job requirements such as working long hours, shift work, and absence from their family. This can negatively affect their interpersonal relationships and intimate relationships (Roberts & Levenson, 2001; Taris et al., 2010). If there is a lack of coping strategies and resilience, a police officer may utilize dysfunctional behaviors such as avoidance, dissociation, alcohol abuse, and suicidal ideation, and they may develop psychiatric disorders (Ungar, 2021). Research has shown that police officers’ deaths as a result of liver disease are double the rate compared to the general population (NcNeill, 1996), reflecting police officers reporting higher alcohol consumption and binge drinking (Ballenger et al., 2011; Weir et al., 2012).

Police officers’ personal lives can have a major impact on their performance on the job and on their families (Peeters et al., 2005). Personal conflict at home has been shown to have a significant relationship with job burnout among officers. Conversely, the pressure of policing can impact the level of conflict within their family, reduce time spent with their family, and lower marital satisfaction (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). Family is generally a primary part of an individual’s social support network and can help reduce stress (Evans et al., 2013). To cope with traumatic events at work, police officers often use maladaptive strategies such as suppressing their thoughts and emotions, which reduces communication with their significant others and increases marital discord. This coping style has also been shown to increase stress symptoms in the long term (Chopko et al., 2018).

### Mental Health

Police officers’ mental health is considered important to their safety and the public’s safety. Officers are at risk of both physical and psychological injuries on the job that may impact their emotional and cognitive functioning which, in turn, can compromise how they perform essential policing responsibilities. Police officers need to be able to quickly determine levels of threat and act appropriately. If they react in an impulsive or overly aggressive way they could put themselves, fellow officers, and the public in danger. One of the key skills in maintaining law and order is being able to de-escalate and remain calm in stressful situations (Price, 2017). Due to the nature of their job, police officers are at an increased risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, acute stress, anxiety, alcohol abuse, and stress-related medical conditions (Price, 2017; Regehr et al., 2021).

Preventing police officers from completing suicide is a priority for all law enforcement agencies. Police officers who are male, midway through their career (average of 12.2 years of experience), and fall below the rank of sergeant have been found statistically to be the highest risk group. Suicide is higher among police officers than the general public (Price, 2017). The suicide rate among police officers in Ontario, Canada, was highest in 2018 when nine officers completed suicide (Milliard, 2020). Experiencing traumatic stress was found to be associated with increased depression symptoms. In a longitudinal study police officers that were also experiencing marital difficulties were 4.8 times more likely to have attempted suicide and officers who had been suspended were 67 times more likely to have attempted suicide (Wang et al., 2010). Police officers who are experiencing traumatic stress symptoms and also report increased alcohol use had higher rates of suicidal ideation.

### Alcohol Use Disorders

Police officers are at an increased risk of developing alcohol use disorders. This is believed to be related to negative strategies to cope with the stress of the profession and a desire to fit in with other officers in social settings that often center on alcohol. According to a study by Ballenger et al. (2011), 18% of male officers and 16% of female officers stated they had experienced negative effects from their alcohol use. Overall, 7.8% of officers felt these negative effects over their lifetime and met the criteria for alcohol abuse or dependence. Gender did not affect the pattern of alcohol use among police officers. However, the rate of alcohol use in female officers was significantly higher than females in the general population (Ballenger et al., 2011).

## Retirement

Police officers in Ontario, Canada, typically retire when they are in their 50s. Officers can retire and receive their full pension when they have completed 30 years of service or when their age and years of service combined are higher than 85. This is known as the 30/85 rule. Officers are then able to collect a pension that is managed by the Ontario Municipal Employees Retirement System (OMERS). When police officers are set to retire, they begin to disengage from the job. This may manifest in two ways: resentful disengagement or strategic disengagement. Officers engaged in resentful disengagement do not value or prioritize their policing responsibilities. Officers engaged in strategic disengagement maintain their commitment to their careers but avoid certain cases or duties that may extend past their retirement date (Parnaby & Weston, 2020).

Symbolic decoupling is another major aspect of retirement for police officers. Police officers on duty wear a uniform and carry a badge, handcuffs, taser, and a gun. They drive police vehicles. They do this for 30 years of their life, and then, on their last day of work, they are required to hand in all their police-related materials. This has the basic purpose of the organization getting their equipment back but also takes away what symbolically shows the world that a person is a police officer (Parnaby & Weston, 2020).

Police organizations often offer support to new recruits and other officers following critical incidents. Improvements involve gradually offering ongoing support throughout officers’ careers. However, an area that is lacking is the transition to retirement. Management in the workplace is the first line that can support and create safe environments where mental health is normalized. Allowing open discussions, providing debriefing, and offering additional support as needed create a supportive workplace. Having the tools in place throughout their career to handle their mental health allows for an easier transition to retirement. Self-care is another skill that is vital to police officers who are retiring. Self-care should be taught in police officer training (if not before), supported throughout their career, and continued in retirement. Police officers who had the easiest time transitioning into retirement are those with the mindset that being an officer is “just a job,” and who have not created their identity around their career, but see their job as one part of their identity. Police officers experience a better transition when they have a strong support system from their family and their policing organization (Smith et al., 2021).

Another way to address the stress associated with retirement is by implementing retirement transition programs. These programs prepare police officers to think about their retirement years beforehand and promote retirement as fun and exciting. However, these programs should be mindful that police officers face unique challenges given the stress of the job and may be forced into retirement before they are ready. Retirement transition programs could include training to develop skills that may lead an officer to a new career. Retired police officers often feel like no one understands their experience, except other police officers. Retirement groups can help police officers feel less isolated, provide a connection, and support their mental health in this difficult transitional time (Smith et al., 2021).

# Resilience

The word resilience has many definitions and when it is applied to policing it takes on different meanings. Bonanno (2004) defined resilience as “the ability to maintain a stable equilibrium” in the face of “isolated and potentially highly disruptive event(s).” The Chief of Defence Staff of the Canadian Armed Forces, Lieutenant-General Jonathan Vance defined resilience as “the personal capacity to face the most extreme circumstances and continue and [face] the grind of daily operations and be able to continue.” Andersen et al., (2015) specified a definition of resilience for policing:

Resilience is both psychological and physiological flexibility in the face of adversity (i.e., a conscious awareness of the best course of action and the best time to take action), self-awareness and control over one’s physiological stress response to threat and recovery from exposures beyond one’s control. (Andersen et al., 2015, p. 624)

It is important for police officers to be self-aware, understand their own physical and mental limitations, and ask for help when they require it. There is evidence to suggest that police officers are more resilient than the average individual; however, they are also exposed to more trauma than the average person. Police officers are required to wear different hats in their jobs; they must show compassion and empathy to victims but be tough and assertive with criminals (Andersen et al., 2015). Gilmartin (2002) described this experience as a “biological roller coaster.” Police officers often experience physiological arousal throughout their shifts, before, during, and even after exposure to a stressful or traumatic call. Some arousal even occurs as soon as the officer puts on their uniform to begin their shift (Andersen et al., 2015).

Police officers offer assistance to the public in moments of crisis and disaster on a daily basis. Following a major disaster, there have been found that the rates of PTSD diagnoses for police officers are low, due to personality traits selected during hiring and disaster response training officers receive (van der Velden et al., 2013). Another protective factor is the sense of purpose and enjoyment that police officers receive from their profession. A positive aspect of their career is the feeling of being able to help and make a difference in their community. It has been suggested that while police officers are given support to manage the stressful elements of the job, there must also be acknowledgment of the positive attributes associated with policing (Birch et al., 2017).

Psychological resilience is the ability to maintain both physical and psychological health after experiencing a traumatic event (Ungar, 2021). Resilience is a process that involves three distinct but interconnected dimensions: recovery, resistance, and reconfiguration. Paton et al., (2008) developed the stress shield police resilience model, which describes resilience among police officers as being contingent on their ability to utilize their physical and psychological resources to reduce the significance of stressful events. The resources help the police officer view a stressful event as coherent, manageable, and meaningful. Officers’ ability to do this reflects a combination of the individual, the team, and the organization (Ungar, 2021).

## Workplace Resilience

Workplace resilience describes how an employee positively reacts and handles adversities they experience at work. Workplace stressors have the potential to negatively affect an employee’s performance and create mental and physical difficulties for the individual. Therefore, workplace resilience is important in creating healthier and more productive employees (Hartwig et al., 2020). Many workplaces, especially those related to policing, have a team environment. It is important to look at resilience both in terms of the individual and on a group level.

Team resilience is especially important in law enforcement because failure to work efficiently together can result in death and/or injury for police officers as well as civilians. Understanding how a team experiences and reacts to adverse situations and stressors can help make them operate efficiently when difficulties arise. Kozowski and Ilgen (2006) described the experience of first responders on a call, noting that team members react in the same way towards stressful situations when they share a mutual goal and rely on one another to achieve that goal. Ideally, police officers would be armed with the skills of personal and team resilience. Hartwig et al. suggested that team resilience allows the group to be minimally impacted by experiencing adverse effects, as measured by their performance (Hartwig et al., 2020).

Adaptability in the face of adverse circumstances was found to be a key characteristic of teams that displayed resiliency. Such resiliency develops over time, as team members interact and share experiences of overcoming challenges together (Hartwig et al., 2020). Team disruptions, such as someone leaving or joining the group, were found to negatively affect the team’s resiliency for a time. A highly skilled team member leaving the team has a greater impact than a less experienced individual leaving (Stuart & Moore, 2017). Incompatibility of team members can also have a negative effect, as they are less likely to support each other and cooperate. If a team is not cooperating, it becomes difficult for them to respond to stressful situations (Vanhove et al., 2015).

Good relationships between team members are another resource for team resilience. Teams with good-quality relationships among members exhibit cohesion and social support when difficulties arise. This increases their emotional and psychological functioning in the workplace, indicating that adverse events would affect them less (Sharma & Sharma, 2016). Teams, such as those in law enforcement, who share values create a shared identity. This shared identity brings the individuals together, creates a sense of belonging, and motivates the individuals to support the team’s purpose. The more an individual identifies with the group the more they contribute to the group (Cheng et al., 2016.) Leadership of a team impacts overall resiliency. Leaders are there to guide and support the team through adverse situations (Hartwig et al., 2020).

Certain individual personality factors have been found to increase team resilience. Resilient team members have high team orientation, meaning they like working with others more than working independently. They are also more likely to be motivated to be cooperative in a team. Landon et al., (2016) found that individual resilience increased team resilience, with higher team performance. Similarly, McEwen and Boyd (2018) found a positive correlation between individual and team resilience. Individuals’ communication skills will impact the team. Team members need to demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively before, during, and after a stressful event. Being able to debrief, that is, to understand what went well and what could be improved, helps a team grow (Maynard & Kennedy, 2016).

## Resilience in Active Police Officers

Police officer resilience includes recognizing your own physical and psychological limitations and strengths. It has been found important that police officers know when to ask for help and when they can continue on their own (Andersen et al., 2015). Flint-Taylor and Cooper (2017) found resilience can be targeted and improved through deliberate training. Chen et al., (2015) suggested that team resilience cannot be defined alone, but is a combination of individual and team resources.

Alliger et al., (2015) stated that team resilience can be categorized into three behaviors: minimizing behavior, managing behavior, and mending behavior. Minimizing behavior is preparing for the negative event, managing behavior is coping with the negative event, and mending behavior is learning and debriefing about the negative event. Challenge preparation training helps develop responses to adversity and lowers the negative effect a situation has on a team. Teams that demonstrate resilience are able to quickly assess a situation, create and enact a plan, and adjust it if the situation changes (Maynard et al., 2015). Debriefing or reflecting helps team members learn about themselves as individuals and how they operate together. After an event occurs, debriefing mitigates the impact of the event and explores how teams can be more effective and what changes to make for future events. Teams with higher resilience saw difficulties as learning opportunities, and a chance to perform better in the future.

An important element in the debriefing is the perceived psychological safety within the group. If team members believe they are safe they will communicate honestly about the adverse situation. Psychological safety is encouraged by a culture that supports team members and encourages them to speak up, take responsibility, and share different opinions without fear of judgment or retribution (Hartwig et al., 2020). Team resilience is increased by a shared team identity, shared mental models, strong communication, cohesion, trust, and psychological safety (Sharma & Sharma, 2016). For police officers, no shift is the same. They are constantly learning and adapting based on the situations with which they are presented. Arnetz et al. (2013) found that simulated exposure to stressful events and practicing adaptive resources to them improved performance and increased resilience.

### Personal Resilience

There are elements of personal resilience that are important contributions to team resilience but combining a group of people with high individual resilience does not guarantee team resilience will result. Individual resilience helps team members cope with adversity and minimize its impact on their performance. This may allow them to focus on teamwork, communicate effectively, and cooperate during adverse events, which will help the team achieve its overall goals. The shared social identity experienced as a team reduces individual stress because the team is more likely to provide support for one another. Instead of feeling like one is dealing with the stressor alone, there is a sense of a shared workload, which reduces the perception of working alone (Hartwig et al., 2020).

Interpersonal relationships that result in social support are linked to higher resilience and should be included in resilience training for both police officers and their families. This helps increase family happiness, job performance, and individuals’ well-being (Ungar, 2021).

In many populations, one protective factor against developing PTSD after exposure to a traumatic event is having social support. Evans et al. (2013) found that police officers used banter and humor with their colleagues when talking about a critical incident. Humor with colleagues is a way for police officers to discuss an incident while distancing themselves from uncomfortable emotions. It was found that humor promotes group cohesion and a sense of safety. Police officers have more emotional discussions with their partners and close family members than with colleagues. Saving emotional discussions for their home life was based on a sense that police officers should be able to cope with the incidents and seeking social support could be detrimental to their reputation. However, police officers noted feeling that people who were outside of their profession may not understand the nuances of the job or might simply not want to hear about their experiences at work because it worries them or the information makes them uncomfortable. Whoever the source of support was, police officers identified supportive interactions as those during which the other people listened, were empathetic, and validated them. They also noted it was important to have someone they felt like they could open up to; even if they chose not to, feeling as though they had the support was important (Evans et al., 2013).

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of resilience training in positively affecting police officers’ personal and professional lives. However, as noted above, individual resilience is important but only part of the puzzle. Ungar (2021) suggested that a multisystemic social–ecological theory should be enacted with resilience training, to not only train the officers but also their families and the policing system on an organizational level. It is important to look at resilience building not only as an individual skill but as a systemic approach to improve the lives of police officers, their families and friends, the community, and the law enforcement organization (Ungar, 2021).

## Resilience in Retired Police Officers

Bonanno (2004) stated that resilience is the ability to “maintain a stable equilibrium” in the face of adversity and to show healthy functioning across time. Pole et al. (2006) defined resilience as functioning well across mental health, physical health, and interpersonal relationships. The authors found that among the male retired police officers they studied, positive resilience across all three domains was significantly correlated with being married and having less mental illness in their family history, a less neurotic personality, less exposure to trauma outside of work, fewer avoidant coping strategies, fewer on-duty safety concerns, fewer administrative work issues, and more openness about work with family. Overall, the most significant factor that predicted resilience in retirement was having less avoidant coping strategies and sharing more about their work with loved ones (Pole et al., 2006).

# Post-traumatic Growth

The concept of post-traumatic growth (PTG) originated in the mid-1990s. Tedeschi et al., (2018) created a detailed model of PTG, describing it as the result of trauma in which an individual experiences positive psychological changes. This does not mean that negative consequences do not exist as well. Examples of potential positive psychological changes include positive self-perception, interpersonal relationships, self-awareness, self-confidence, openness to others, and new life experiences. Major life experiences that disrupt a person’s worldview are frequently the catalyst for change, including both negative and positive experiences. Little research has focused on what positive changes can occur as a result of experiencing trauma. Individuals who faced trauma may experience positive reinforcement about their identity because they were able to survive and create a new identity for themselves as a result. Various aspects of growth have been suggested as a result of PTG: durable relationships due to increased tolerance, increased sensitivity and compassion, hope, appreciation for life, ability to handle difficulties, and difference in values. One major feature of PTG is the context, such as whether the individual has access to social support, resources, and coping strategies. All of these play a huge role in promoting positive outcomes after experiencing trauma (Dell’Osso et al., 2022).

PTG is an outcome of the reconfiguration dimension that focuses on positive changes (Ramos & Leal, 2013). A person described as resilient could experience a traumatic event yet remain psychologically healthy. PTG evolves out of a psychological struggle following a trauma. PTG involves major life changes because the traumatic event shook the person’s beliefs and they reacted in a transformational way. Resilience uses personal resources to navigate stressful experiences without the individual feeling a major impact (Elam & Taku, 2022).

Not everyone who experiences a traumatic event reports meaningful levels of personal growth. This is why exploring what factors support the emergence of PTG is important. The growth experienced is not because of the event but a result of the struggle to deal with the event. This means an individual who experiences PTG also experiences distress from the traumatic event. Their world has been shaken, and the assumptions they once had challenged. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2014) said that shaking and shattering a person’s worldview is required for their world to be reconstructed. Individuals do this by cognitively engaging and asking questions about their lives, looking for explanations as to why a traumatic event happened, and understanding the effects the event had and will have on their lives (Henson et al., 2020).

According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (2014), cognitive processing is associated with higher levels of PTG through deliberate rumination, whereas intrusive rumination is more likely linked to PTSD and depression. However, both forms of rumination are associated with higher PTG levels (Henson et. al., 2020). Sharing a traumatic experience in a supportive social setting can foster cognitive processing. Disclosure helps individuals to feel understood and their experience normalized. Coping strategies also influence PTG as they can help an individual to have a more positive perception of a traumatic event. Religious coping is strongly correlated with growth (Henson et al., 2020). Religion can help an individual give meaning to the trauma, provide social and community support, and provide a sense of control. Positive reappraisal coping occurs when an individual reframes negative events in a more positive way, which may create more positive changes and PTG (Henson et al., 2020).

## Measurement of Post-traumatic Growth

PTG is seen in five major areas: greater appreciation for life, improved relationships, increased personal strength, spiritual growth, and new life paths. People who experience PTG let go of control or place less emphasis on the importance of certain events and begin to appreciate things that were previously insignificant. For example, an individual who prior to a traumatic event thought having a luxury car was a priority, due to post-traumatic growth might feel lucky to feel the wind on their face on a sunny day. After a traumatic event, reaching out to friends and family for their support and guidance creates a stronger and closer bond. Surviving a traumatic event gives the individual the knowledge that they are capable of dealing with future difficult situations. Spiritual growth can be seen among those who experience trauma and use religion to find meaning in the event (Ramos & Leal, 2013).

## Policing and PTG

Trauma exposure can be categorized in two ways: experiencing a threat to oneself and being exposed to a threat to others. Police officers experience both throughout their careers and at a higher frequency than the general population. On average, police officers were found to be exposed to 168 significant traumatic events while in the line of duty (Chopko et al., 2018). Lower rates of depression and better health have been found to be associated with higher levels of PTG. Of noted importance is the distinction between cognitive and behavioral PTG. Cognitive change and making meaning of the trauma must include behavioral changes and actions to improve quality of life. Chopko et al. (2018) found police officers experiencing traumatic events that threaten their own safety is more closely related to PTG, while witnessing harm done to others was not linked to PTG.

In their roles, police officers encounter different experiences, calls, and individuals and they have to actively utilize problem-solving skills to perform their job. Increased PTG is associated with using active problem-solving. Officers were found to use behavioral (action-based) coping strategies while disengaging from the cognitive (emotional) coping strategies while attending to a critical incident. This allows the police officers to maintain a sense of control and help victims without getting personally attached, which results in lower cognitive PTG but higher behavioral PTG among police officers (Chopko et al., 2018).

# Interventions

## Mental Preparedness

Mental preparedness relates to the idea that police officers should be trained to create and sustain resilience in the same way they are trained with weapons or in report writing. Mental preparedness is both psychological and physiological. Psychologically, police officers need to be aware of their state of mind, their arousal levels, and their focus, and be able to keep a clear mind. Physiologically, police officers need control over their autonomic nervous system's stress response, with breathing and visualization skills. Resilient individuals encounter a stressful incident and view it as manageable. This is because they are confident in their abilities to overcome the threat, either by themselves or by asking for support. Mindfulness-based training has been shown to reduce stress and mental health symptoms in police officers. Mindfulness skills reduce symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and hyperarousal, which enhances police resilience. Mindfulness training will reduce overall stress for officers, which should improve their performance as well as their overall mental and physical health (Andersen et al., 2015). With training, mental preparedness can become an officer’s automatic response to a stressor. It helps police officers to make decisions more effectively, have situational awareness, and to manage their energy output (Andersen et al., 2015).

For mental preparedness training to be effective it needs to be brief and something that can be applied in the moment. Learning should be completed in a non-stressful environment. Once mastered, officers should be trained to utilize the skill right before and after a stressful scenario. This helps the police officer to be both mentally and physically ready for the call they are about to go on, to recover from the stress they experienced on the call, and to continue the rest of their shift (Andersen et al., 2015).

## Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

Critical incident stress debriefing (CISD) was developed by Jeffrey T. Mitchell for small-group crisis intervention. Mitchell was a retired Baltimore County firefighter and in the 1970s he wanted to help first responders have a system to recover after experiencing a critical (traumatic) incident. CISD is a group discussion consisting of a seven-phase system in response to a critical incident. One intervention that falls under the umbrella of CISD is Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM). CISM and CISD were created to address the trauma of a stressful incident in a triage-like manner. The goal is to return the individual(s) who experienced the critical incident to their prior level of functioning. A critical incident is a stressful event that overwhelms already existing coping strategies, which could impair the individual’s ability to handle their everyday stress (Malcom et al., 2005).

CISD is used with groups of first responders who all attended the same critical incident. CISD was designed to occur 48–72 hours after a critical incident, to assist the individuals involved in the event to process the event in a cognitively and emotionally healthy way (Hammond & Brooks, 2001). In law enforcement, the group includes at least one peer (who is a police officer but was not involved in the event) and at least one mental health professional. CISD is broken down into seven stages. The first stage introduces and describes the process, its rules, confidentiality, and expectations. In the second stage, the police officers introduce themselves and their role in the incident. This is also known as the Fact Phase. In the third stage, the Thought Phase, they share the thoughts they had immediately after the incident. The fourth stage, the Reaction Phase, involves understanding their reactions. In the fifth stage, the Symptom Phase, symptoms related to the critical incident are reviewed and normalized. The sixth stage, the Teaching Phase, gives the police officers tools to deal with stressful incidents in their lives. The last phase is the Reentry Phase, in which officers are encouraged to ask questions or discuss any other outstanding issues. This phase is when police officers are preparing to go back to work. The purpose of CISD is a gradual return to their level of functioning prior to experiencing the critical incident (Malcom et al., 2005).

It is important to note that CISD is not psychotherapy but rather a debriefing technique guided by a mental health professional and law enforcement officer. The facilitators must be properly trained to provide CISD. The group setting was found to be helpful in re-establishing safety and a sense of order. The role of facilitators is to validate the participants’ feelings and reactions. They also educate the participants on what to expect when processing the incident, provide coping strategies, and explain how to utilize their social support systems. CISM is one part of the process of experiencing a critical incident and should be utilized in conjunction with other services, on a case-by-case basis, including peer support programs and counseling (Hammond & Brooks, 2001).

## Stress Resilience Training System

The Stress Resilience Training System (SRTS) was created as a low-cost, easy-to-use, and engaging way to improve the health and performance of military members. Its aim is to reduce stress by supporting resilience-building and self-regulation skills. Recently, a study was conducted by the HeartMath Institute and its results were found to be transferable to law enforcement and correctional officers. SRTS is a training course that can be completed anywhere at any time, available as an iPad app. The training includes a psychoeducational piece about the physiology of resilience and stress, a series of self-regulation techniques, and heart rate variability coherence biofeedback. A theme throughout the training is being able to self-regulate in the face of energy-draining emotions. Learning this helps with sustaining stress resilience. Police officers experience fatigue and energy-draining emotional responses to critical incidents. This depletes their energy and ability to self-regulate, leading to decreased resilience. Overall, the SRTS training was found to be helpful and accessible. It addresses possible stigma associated with seeing a mental health professional. Positive results were reported in participants’ job performance and personal lives (Weltman et al., 2014).

## Peer Support Program

Peer support programs were created for co-workers to support each other through difficult situations. The peers are trained to provide confidential support. Within law enforcement, there are certain stigmas associated with seeking psychological help. There is also a belief that mental health professionals do not understand the job the same way a fellow police officer would. Peer support programs may make it more likely for an officer to ask for help. The individuals who act as peer support are trained to identify potential signs of risk factors such as suicide, substance abuse, anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Peer support breaks the ice for an individual seeking help. Peer support can provide validation that whatever issues the officers are experiencing are real and identifying that they are struggling does not mean that they are weak. The initial acknowledgment that help might be required is easier for a police officer to admit to another officer than contacting a mental health professional is. The peer support person will have referral sources to provide to officers in need when they are ready to receive additional support. Additionally, these support people are comfortable and informed about working with the law enforcement population. Peer support programs were first created in the 1980s in the United States of America (Van Hasselt et al., 2019). Peer support programs in Ontario, Canada, have only recently gained popularity (Millard, 2020).

Research on professional burnout has found the importance of peer support. Peer support programs are an ongoing source of support for police officers, whereas other interventions specifically follow a critical incident but are not available on an everyday basis. Police officers found it was easier to share with their peer supporters when they were in a detachment that had a supportive environment. Police officers reported that peer support was a helpful tool for them to learn about themselves and their mental health and that it showed that the organization cared about them seeking help early. Peer support programs were viewed as helpful for the organizational stressors of policing, not just traumatic events (Milliard, 2020).

# Future Research

Future research should involve a holistic approach to how to best support police officers by focusing on not only the officers but on their surrounding support systems, such as their families and the policing organizational system. Previous research has mainly focused on how to be reactive after police officers have experienced a critical incident. However, it would be interesting to examine a more proactive approach, for example, if police officers, the community, their families, and the policing organization surrounding them all receive resilience-building training, as a systematic approach. This focuses less on the individual and takes a collective approach.

The field of PTG is new and more research is needed given that police officers experience traumatic incidents regularly in the line of duty. Focusing on the positive side of recovering from a traumatic incident is interesting and especially relevant to policing. Increased knowledge about how distress and PTG are linked would also allow mental health professionals to be better able to support the law enforcement community.

**Limitations**

Police officers are a difficult population to study, especially regarding topics that might imply weakness or carry a stigma, such as mental health. Policing organizations, in recent years, have begun to address and normalize seeking mental health help. Programs such as CISD and peer support bring mental health care to the individual instead of the individual having to ask for help. However, police culture still needs to undergo a transformation to embrace further change. Police officers, as participants, have challenges because of shift work, police culture, and difficulties in disclosing. It is difficult to generalize the findings of trauma research to police officers who typically and routinely experience more traumatic events in the line of duty than the general public experiences. Policing as a profession can be very insular and a unique experience to study and to live. Therefore, it is important that researchers who are conducting studies on this population be knowledgeable about police culture and gain trust and access to the population.

Tedeschi et al., (2018) created a detailed model of post-traumatic growth, describing it as a result of trauma in which an individual experiences positive psychological changes. This does not mean that negative consequences do not exist as well. Examples of the psychological changes that are possible include positive: self-perception, interpersonal relationships, self-awareness, self-confidence, openness to others, and new life experiences.

# Conclusion

Policing has a long history in Ontario, dating back to 1871 (Ontario Provincial Police, 2023). It has continued to evolve and grow as a profession. Currently, in 2024, mental health is a major concern for police officers. Policing is widely considered one of the most stressful occupations (Violanti et al., 2017). On a daily basis, police officers have the possibility of being exposed to traumatic incidents. Research has shown that police officers experience mental health issues at an increased rate compared to the general public. Understanding how to best support police officers deal with the stress and trauma they experience on duty is of benefit to both the police officers and also the public. Supporting officers allows them to be the best version of themselves both on the job and in their personal lives. Understanding more about resilience and PTG can help police officers combat the chronic and frequent trauma they experience.

Police culture includes the shared beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes found in law enforcement organizations and it has both positive and negative aspects (Hazard, 1966; Skolnick, 1966). Police culture is not universal; it can vary based on the organization, the members’ ranks, and the individual officers’ personalities (Paoline, 2003). Understanding police culture is important for eliminating the stigma associated with having mental health difficulties. Acceptance of asking for help has to occur on an individual level and also system-wide within policing organizations. Police officers have to balance a duality in their role; they must be both emotionally and physically tough, yet this toughness does not always allow for an environment in which mental health awareness and treatment are prioritized (Hakik & Langlois, 2020).

Police officers in Ontario, Canada, are eligible to retire when they have completed 30 years of service or when their age and years of service combined are higher than 85. This means that police officers may retire earlier than the general public, often in their 50s (Parnaby & Weston, 2020). New recruits and officers who have experienced critical incidents are typically those who receive psychological support. Ongoing career support and support into retirement are improving but these areas could be improved upon. If a police officer receives support from the moment they are hired, throughout their career, and after critical incidents, they will have the tools in place to understand and manage their mental health. Therefore, when they are ready to retire, having those skills in place will allow for an easier transition into retirement (Smith, 2021).

Having psychological resilience means that after a traumatic event, individuals are able to maintain both their physical and psychological health (Ungar, 2021). To do this, police officers have to have self-awareness and be able to ask for help when they realize they are physically or mentally struggling. Police officers need to be able to identify the stressful event as coherent, manageable, and meaningful. To be able to do this, the officer must have support at the individual level, through their team, and from the organization as a whole (Ungar, 2021). A resilient person who experienced a traumatic event is nevertheless able to remain psychologically healthy. PTG evolves out of a psychological struggle following a trauma. Overall, police officers have been found to be more resilient compared to the general population. However, their resilience is tested because they experience more traumatic events than the general population (Andersen et al., 2015).

Various interventions to support law enforcement officers were explored: mental preparedness, CISD, SRTS, and peer support groups. Mental preparedness indicates that one can be trained to protect psychological health in the same way that police officers are trained for report writing or the use of force. Mental preparedness includes both the psychological and the physiological to sustain and build resilience. Psychologically, police officers need to keep a clear mind, and be aware of their state of mind, their arousal levels, and their focus. Physiologically, police officers must use breathing and visualization skills to control their autonomic nervous systems’ stress responses, with breathing and visualization skills (Andersen et al., 2015). CISD was created to address the stress associated with a critical incident through a small-group crisis intervention. The goal of the program is to take people from a state of stress and return them to their pre-crisis level of functioning. A critical incident is defined as an event that overwhelms an individual’s coping abilities and can lead to impairment in their psychological well-being (Malcom et al., 2005). SRTS, an iPad app, is a portable versatile way to reduce stress by supporting resilience-building and self-regulation skills (Weltman et al., 2014). Peer support programs are for police officers to support other police officers. Peers are trained to identify and support fellow police officers who may be struggling with their mental health. This program was created to address the stigma associated with seeking help through a mental health professional (Milliard, 2020).

Overall, one of the most important factors determining whether an officer will seek support when they are struggling with their mental health is having a safe support environment where mental health is normalized. Management in the policing organization should allow for open discussions, provide debriefing services, and information on how to seek further psychological resources. Policing is an incredibly stressful career that involves seeing traumatic incidents in a frequent and ongoing way. It is essential that support and interventions are implemented for police officers to be productive peacekeeping officers while on duty, in their personal lives, and in retirement. Addressing the stigma associated with mental health has begun but there is still work to be done, on an individual, community, management, and organizational level.

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