**Major Research Paper**

**Building Resilience in Police Officers: A Literature Review**

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**Introduction**

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. These include, death, abuse, violence, natural disasters and many more. Their jobs are to enforce law and order and as a result 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 the 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 resiliency can be built through training. With the goal of helping police officers be successful managing stress and trauma while on the job and in retirement. This will be accomplished through a systematic review and analysis of the literature. This paper will focus on understanding the police officer profession, its history, the modern day experience, and life after policing. One of the key focuses of the paper will be on understanding resilience, what current models are being used to build resilience in police officers, and what potential models could be beneficial. In addition this paper will examine the field of post traumatic growth and how to best support officers who are impacted by trauma. Overall, the goal is to understand and 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. Both while they are active officers serving their community and in their retirement. Finally, the findings will be discussed along with directions for future research.

**Background History**

In 1871, Canada was divided into Upper and Lower Canada through the Constitutional Act. Untrained high constables and constables were held responsible for the small settlements that existed. This beginning system of policing continued until Confederation 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. Ontario was formed in 1867. 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). In 1875 John Wilson Murray was the first full-time police officer for the province of Ontario. The second and third Ontario detectives were added in 1884 and 1892. On October 13, 1909 the provincial police force was formed. The Ontario Provincial Police were responsible for investigating serious crimes as well as the The Games 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. Command was centralized, uniforms and equipment were standardized and police orders were created. In 1963 with the increasingly modern world Ontario policing again began to change. Command structure supported 17 districts of policing and training became a huge priority. In 1974 women were 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. They police over the province of Ontario that has more than 12 million people. Including 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, 2023).

**Literature Review**

**Police Culture**

Occupational cultures exist within many vocations. They are created through the reaction of members within a culture to a variety of situations and problems. Occupational cultures contain practices, rules, rituals and expectations regarding conduct (Stuart & Moore, 2017). Police officers deal with two environments, one is occupational working and the other is organizational. Occupational environment involves community work and the organizational environment relates to their experience with the formal police ranking structure. Police culture can vary based on different policing organizations, rank of the member, and individual officer styles (Paloine, 2003).

Banton (1964) and Rubinstein (1973) described police officers as “peacekeepers” not law enforcement officers, in some of the earliest studies on policing (Hazard, 1966). Jerome Skolnick (1966) was one of the pioneers in studying policing and the police regarding occupational culture. Skolnick (1966) stated police culture includes shared beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes that are ingrained within law enforcement organizations (Hazard, 1966). Police culture has both positive and negative aspects to it. Police culture emphasizes solidarity, loyalty, and a “us versus them” mentality, which can lead to police officers distancing themselves from the public. These beliefs, Skolnick posits, can lead to prioritizing officer safety and group solidarity over individual rights or procedural justice. This culture also struggles with perceived threats to autonomy or authority, which may be seen through criticism or external oversight. However, Skolnick also describes the positives in policing 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) created the “working personality” which describes the mindset, characteristics, behaviour, and coping skills an individual uses, to adapt to the needs of their profession. This is seen particularly in high stress work environments. In terms of police officers, Skolnick described; hypervigilance, assertiveness/decisiveness, emotional detachment, and loyalty/comradery. Hypervigilance is developed because police officers must have a heightened awareness of their surroundings and potential threat. This can help keep the officer safe but can create a sense of distrust in their community, if they are always looking for danger. 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, they need to be able to compartmentalize their emotions to complete their job. The close working relationships seen in many police departments allows 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 where 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 on duty, seeing the death of another officer, experiencing physical/verbal abuse, child abuse cases, death of a child, witnessing critical incidents, workplace discrimination, strained relationships between fellow officers, and job dissatisfaction were found to be the highest stressors for police officers (Violanti & Aron, 1995; Gershon et al., 2009). 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, use of force situations, and physical attacks were rated the most stressful. However, it is important to note these stressors have a lower frequency of occurrence. Highly rated stressors that also occur frequently include; family disputes, felony in progress calls, 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 more challenging work environment which increases the chance of burnout and results in both psychological and physical difficulties. This includes the logistics of the job requirements, such as, working long hours, shift work, 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 behaviours such as avoidance, dissociation, alcohol abuse, suicidal ideation, and form psychiatric disorders (Ungar, 2021). Research has shown police officers' cause of death as a result of liver disease is double compared to the general population (NcNeill, 1996). With police officers reporting higher alcohol consumption and binge drinking (Ballenger et al., 2011; Weir et al., 2012).

A police officer's personal life can have a big impact on their performance on the job and on their family (Peeters et al., 2005). Personal conflict at home has been shown to have a significant relationship to job burnout among officers. Conversely the pressure of policing can impact the level of conflict within their family, reduces time spent with their family, and lowers marital satisfaction (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). Family is generally a main 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 leads to a reduction in communication with their significant others and increased marital discord. This coping style has also been shown to increase stress symptoms in the long run (Chopko et al., 2018).

***Mental Health***

Police officers' mental health is considered important to the officer’s safety but also the public's safety. Officers are at risk of both physical and psychological injuries on the job. These 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 given the level. 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 most at risk group. Suicide is higher in police officers than the general public (Price, 2017). Suicide rates for police officers in Ontario, Canada was its highest in 2018, with nine officers completing 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 that also report an 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 coping strategies to deal with the stress of the profession. As well as a want to fit in with other officers, where social settings often centre 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 50’s. 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 is seen in two ways; through resentful disengagement and strategic disengagement. Resentful disengagement means officers do not value or prioritize their policing responsibilities. Strategic disengagement is when an officer maintains their commitment to their career but avoids certain cases or duties that may stretch past their retirement date (Parnaby & Weston, 2020).

Symbolic decoupling is another major piece involved in retirement for police officers. Police officers on duty wear a uniform, carry a badge, handcuffs, taser and a gun, they drive police vehicles, and they do this for 30 years of their life. On an officer’s 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 material items back, but also taking what symbolically shows to the world a person is a police officer. (Parnaby & Weston, 2020).

Police organizations often focus support on new recruits and following critical incidents. Improvements have slowly started towards on-going support throughout their career, but 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 for open discussions, providing for debriefing and additional support as needed creates 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. It should be learned 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 had the mindset that being an officer is “just a job”. Officers who have not created their identity around their career, instead their job is part of their identity. Police officers had a better transition when they had a strong support system with their family and their policing organization (Smith, 2021).

Another way to address the stress associated with retirement is implementing retirement transition programs. These programs prepare police officers to think about their retirement years before it will happen. Promoting retirement as a fun and exciting event. However, these programs should also be mindful that police officers also have unique challenges given the stress of the job and may be forced into retirement before they are ready. An additional part of retirement transition programs could include training to develop skills that may lead an officer to a new career. Oftentimes in retirement police officers can feel like no one else 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, 2021).

**Resilience**

The word resilience has many different definitions, and when it is applied to policing it also 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) specify 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, pg. 624).

It is important for police officers to be self-aware and understand their own physical and mental limitations and ask for help when they require it. There is some 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 the “biological roller coaster”. Police officers likely experience physiological arousal throughout their shift, 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 the public assistance in moments of crisis and disaster on a daily basis. Following a major disaster there have been found to be low rates of PTSD diagnosed in police officers. Due to personality traits selected during hiring and disaster response training officers receive (van der Velden et al., 2013). Another protective factor was the sense of purpose and enjoyment that police officers receive from the profession. The positive aspect of their career is the feeling of being able to help and make a difference in their community. Therefore it’s suggested that while supporting police officers manage the stressful elements of the job there must also be an 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 different but interconnected dimensions. These include recovery, resistance, and reconfiguration. Paton et al., (2008) developed the stress shield police resilience model. The model describes resilience for police officers 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 take the stressful event and view it as coherent, manageable and meaningful. The ability of the officer to do this is a combination of the individual, the team and the organization (Ungar, 2021).

**Workplace Resilience**

Workplace resilience is 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 policing, have a team environment. It is important to look at resilience in terms of the individual but also 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 the police officers as well as the civilians. Understanding how a team experiences and reacts to adverse situations and stressors can help make them operate efficiently when difficulties arise. Kozowski & Ilgen (2006) describe the experience of first responders on a call, teams react the same way to stressful situations when they share a mutual goal and rely on one another to achieve the goal. Ideally police officers would be armed with the skills of personal and team resilience. Hartwig et al. suggest 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. This resiliency was developed over time, as the team members interact and share more experiences of overcoming challenges together (Hartwig et al., 2020). Team disruptions, such as someone leaving or joining the group was found to negatively affect the teams 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 and cooperate with each other. If a team is not cooperating it becomes difficult to respond to stressful situations (Vanhove et al., 2015).

Good relationships between team members was another resource for team resilience. A good quality relationship within the team showed cohesion, and social support when difficulties arise. Which increases their emotional and psychological functioning in the workplace suggesting adverse events would affect them less (Sharma and Sharma, 2016). Teams, such as law enforcement, that have shared 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, support the team through adverse situations (Hartwig et al., 2020).

There are certain individual personality factors that 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 also impact the team. Team members need to demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively before, during, and after a stressful event. Being able to debrief, understand what went well and what could be improved helps the team grow (Maynard & Kennedy, 2016).

**Resilience in Active Police Officers**

Police officer resilience includes recognizing your own physical and psychological limitations and strengths. For police officers it has been found important to know when to ask for help and when they are able to continue individually (Andersen et al., 2015). Flint-Taylor and Cooper (2017) found resilience can be targeted and improved through deliberate training. Chen et al., 2015 suggests that team resilience cannot be defined alone instead it is a combination of individual and team resources. Alliger et al., (2015), stated that team resilience can be categorized into three behaviours; minimizing behaviour, managing behaviour and mending behaviour. Minimizing behaviour is preparing for the negative event, managing behaviour is coping with the negative event, and mending behaviour is learning and debriefing about the negative event. Challenge preparation training helps develop responses to adversity and lower the negative effect the situation has on the team. Teams that demonstrate resilience are able to quickly assess the situation, create and enact a plan, and adjust if the situation changes (Maynard et al., 2015). Debriefing, or reflecting, helps a team learn about themselves as individuals and how they operate as a team. After an event occurs debriefing helps to mitigate the impact of the event, learn how they can be more effective, and make changes for future events. Teams with higher resilience saw difficulties as learning opportunities, and a chance to be 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. This psychological safety is encouraged by a culture that supports members of the team to speak up, take responsibility, and share different opinions without fear of judgment or retribution (Hartwig et al., 2020). Team resilience is increased by sharing; 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 situation they are presented with. Arnetz et al., (2013) found imaginary exposure to stressful events, practicing adaptive resources to those stressful events 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 occur. However, individual resilience helps the team member cope with the adversity and have minimal impact on their performance. This may allow them to focus on teamwork, communicate effectively, and cooperate during adverse events, which will help the team's overall goal. 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 you are dealing with the stressor alone, there’s a shared sense of workload which reduces the perception of individual work (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 the individuals well being (Ungar, 2021). Across many different populations one of the protective factors against developing PTSD after a traumatic exposure is having social support. Evans et al., (2013) found among colleagues police officers used banter and humour to talk about a critical incident. Humour with colleagues was a way for the police officers to discuss the incident but also distance themselves from uncomfortable emotions. It was also found that humour promotes group cohesion and a sense of safety. Police officers had more emotional discussions with their partners and close family members. 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 did note feeling like 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 support interactions as ones where the person listened, was 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 for positively affecting police officers personal and professional lives. However, as noted above, individual resilience is important but only part of the puzzle. Ungar (2021) suggests a multisystemic social ecological theory should be enacted with resilience training. To not only train the officers but 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 a systemic approach to improve the lives of police officers, their family and friends, the community, and the law enforcement organization (Ungar, 2021).

**Resilience in Retired Police Officers**

Bonnano (2004) stated 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) defines resilience as functioning well across mental health, physical health, and interpersonal relationships. Pole et al., (2006) found that among the male retired police officers they studied positive resilience across all three domains was significantly correlated with being married, having less family history of mental illness, less neurotic personality, less exposure to trauma outside of work, having less avoidant coping strategies, fewer on duty safety concerns, less administrative work issues, and openness about work with family. Overall, the most significant factor that predicted resilience in retirement was less avoidant coping strategies and sharing more about work with loved ones (Pole et al., 2006).

**Post Traumatic Growth**

Post traumatic growth (PTG) originated in the mid 1990’s. Tedeschi et al., (2018) has created a more detailed model of post traumatic growth, describing it as a result of trauma where 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. Major life experiences that shake a person's worldview are frequently the catalyst for change, both negative and positive experiences. Not much research has been focused on what positive changes can occur as a result of experiencing trauma. An individual who experienced trauma may experience positive reinforcement about their identity, that 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 of the major features of PTG is the context, does the individual have access to social support, resources, 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 and only focuses on the positive changes (Ramos & Leal, 2013). A person described as resilient would experience a traumatic event, 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. Which 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) believe shaking and shattering a person's worldview is required for their world to be reconstructed. The individual does this through cognitively engaging. Asking two questions about their life; looking for an explanation to why the traumatic event happened and understanding the effect the event has had and will have on their life (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 was more likely linked to PTSD and depression. However, both forms of rumination were associated with higher PTG levels (Henson et. al., 2020). Sharing a traumatic experience in a supportive social setting can also foster cognitive processing. Disclosure helps the individual 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 was 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 Posttraumatic 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 instead begin to appreciate things that were previously insignificant. For example, an individual who prior to the traumatic event thought having a luxury car was a priority in life, their traumatic growth might be that they 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 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 in those that experienced 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 threat to the self and being exposed to life threat or harm of others. Police officers experience both throughout their career 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 increased levels of health have been found to be associated with higher levels of PTG. Of noted importance is the distinction between cognitive and behavioural PTG. Cognitive change, making meaning of the trauma, needs to also include behavioural changes and action for quality of life to be increased. Chopko et al., (2018) found when a police officer experiences a traumatic event that is a threat to their own safety it 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. 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 behavioural (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 the victims without getting personally attached. Which results in lower cognitive PTG but higher behavioural PTG in police officers (Chopko et al., 2018).

**Interventions**

**Mental preparedness**

Mental preparedness is the idea that police officers should be trained to create and sustain resilience in the same way they are trained with weapons or report writing. Mental preparedness is both psychologically and physiologically. Psychologically, police officers need to be aware of their state of mind, their arousal levels, their focus, and be able to keep a clear mind. Physiologically, police officers need control over their autonomic nervous systems 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 that they will be able 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 reduced 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 they can apply in the moment. Learning should be completed in a non stressful environment. Then later when 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 1970’s he wanted to help first responders have a system to recover after experiencing a critical (traumatic) incident. CISD is a group discussion that consists 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 triagelike 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 would lead to impairment in the individual's ability to handle their everyday stress (Malcom et al., 2005).

CISD is used for a group of first responders that all attended the same critical incident. CISD was designed to occur 48-72 hours after a critical incident occurred, to assist the individuals involved in the event to be able 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 and not involved in the event) and at least one mental health professional. CISD is broken down into 7 stages. The first stage is the Introduction and describes the process, rules, confidentiality, and expectations. The second stage the police officers all introduce themselves and their role in the incident, known as the Fact Phase. In the third stage, the Thought Phase, they share their thoughts immediately after the incident. The fourth stage (Reaction Phase), is understanding the reactions. In the fifth stage, the Symptom Phase, and symptoms related to the critical incident are reviewed and normalized. The sixth stage is the Teaching Phase and the police officers are given tools to deal with stressful incidents in their lives. The last phase is the Reentry Phase and officers are encouraged to ask questions or discuss any other outstanding issues. This phase is where 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 instead a guided debriefing technique led 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, coping strategies, and how to utilize their social support system. CISM is part of the process of experiencing a critical incident. It 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 health and performance in military members. Its aim is to reduce stress by supporting resilience building and self regulation skills. Recently a study was conducted by the Institute of HeartMath and found results were transferable to law enforcement and correctional officers as well. SRTS is a training course that can be completed anywhere at any time, it is available as an iPad app. The training includes a psychoeducational piece about the physiology of resilience and stress, 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 both fatigue and energy-draining emotional responses to critical incidents. This depletes both their energy and ability to self-regulate, leading to decreased resilience. Overall, the SRTS training was found helpful in its accessibility. It also 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 don’t 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 the peer supports are trained to identify potential signs of risk factors such as, suicide, substance abuse, anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Peer supports break the ice for an individual seeking support. The peer support can provide validation that whatever issues the officers are experiencing are real and it does not make them weak to identify they are struggling. The initial acknowledgement that help might be required is easier for a police officer to say to another officer than contacting a mental health professional. The peer support will have referral sources to provide to the officer in need when they are ready to receive additional support. These additional supports are comfortable and informed about working with the law enforcement population. Peer support programs were first created in the 1980’s 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 in professional burnout has found the importance of peer support. Peer support programs are an ongoing source of support for police officers. Whereas other interventions are specifically following a critical incident but aren’t available on an everyday basis. Police officers found it was easier to share with their peer supports when they were in a detachment that had a supportive environment. Police officers reported the peer support was a helpful tool for them to learn about themselves, their mental health, and showed that the organization cared about them seeking help early. Peer support programs were also viewed as helpful for the organizational stressors of policing, not just traumatic events (Milliard, 2020).

**Future Research**

Future research should involve a more holistic approach in how to best support police officers. Focusing on not only the officer, but their surrounding support system, such as their family and the policing organizational system. 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 family, and the policing organization surrounding them all receive resilience building training, as a systematic approach. Focusing less on the individual but looking at the collective approach.

The field of PTG is new and more research is needed given police officers experience traumatic incidents regularly in the line of duty. Focusing on the positive side of being able to recover from a traumatic incident is interesting and especially relevant to policing. An 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 the peer support program, bring mental health support to the individual instead of the individual having to ask for help. However, police culture still needs to undergo a culture transformation to embrace further change. Police officers as participants have challenges because of shift work, police culture, and difficulties disclosing. In regard to trauma research it is hard to generalize findings to police officers because they typically and routinely experience more traumatic events, in the line of duty, then the general public. Policing as a profession can be very insular and a unique experience both to study and to live. Therefore, it is important while conducting studies on this population that the researcher be knowledgeable about police culture, as well as gain trust/access to the population.

Tedeschi et al., (2018) has created a more detailed model of post traumatic growth, describing it as a result of trauma where 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, a major concern for police officer’s is mental health. 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 rates 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 but 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 to combat the chronic and frequent trauma they experience.

Skolnick (1966) stated police culture includes shared beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes and is found within law enforcement organizations (Hazard, 1966). Police culture has both positive and negative aspects to it. Policing culture is not universal; instead it can vary based on the organization, the members ranking, and the individual officers personality (Paloine, 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 the individual level but also system wide within the policing organizations. Police officers have to balance a duality in their role, they must be both emotionally and physically tough. This toughness sometimes does not allow for the environment of mental health awareness and treatment to be 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 often police officers are retiring sooner than the general public, in their 50’s (Parnaby & Weston, 2020). New recruits and officers who have experienced critical incidents are typically the officers that receive psychological support. Ongoing career support and support into retirement are improving but are still areas that 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).

An individual having psychological resilience means after a traumatic event they 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 on the individual level, through their team, and from the organization as a whole (Ungar, 2021). A resilient person experiences a traumatic event and is 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 more as 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 is the idea that psychological health can be trained the same way police officers are trained for report writing or with 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, 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 response, 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 a person 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 would lead to impairment in their psychological well being (Malcom et al., 2005). SRTS is an iPad app, 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 that determines 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 of 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 important that support and interventions are implemented for police officers to be productive officers of the peace, 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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