# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Throughout U.S. history, there have been groups of citizens chartered with the responsibility of enforcing laws and protecting individual rights or ideals. The two primary groups responsible for these duties are the military and law enforcement, which are controlled by the federal government and by federal, state, and local entities, respectively. Each group is governed by distinct and specific authorities that authorize them to operate in the United States and, in some cases, foreign environments. Although these groups can differ, there are some commonalities, including the effect of prolonged and significant stressors associated with combat operations and daily stressors associated with high-stress police work. Another commonality is the potentially negative impact of these stressors on military members’ and law enforcement officers’ families. Combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan affected nearly every aspect of physical, emotional, and social well-being among these veterans and their family members (Spelman et al., 2012).

Since 2001, there were approximately 2,700,000 U.S. military service members engaged in operations in combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many were deployed multiple times (Costs of War, 2015). A 2003 Bureau of Justice survey indicated that nearly 23% of U.S. law enforcement agencies provided over 11,000 officers to active-duty service for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When service members return home from deployments and resume work or obtain employment in local law enforcement agencies, combat-related stressors may surface in their day-to-day policing duties. The psychological effects of combat on military veterans in law enforcement may include posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and a range of other physical and emotional conditions (Webster, 2006). If untreated, these conditions could worsen through ongoing exposure to traumatic events in policing (Geronazzo-Alman et al., 2017; Weichselbaum & Schwartzapfel, 2017).

While military veterans in law enforcement may be directly exposed to trauma from combat and policing, their spouses are also at significant risk of developing mental health issues as a result of the veterans’ experiences (Greinacher et al., 2019; Meffert et al., 2014; Renshaw, 2011), including secondary trauma. Research has shown that military spouses’ PTSD symptoms and other mental health issues can be directly linked to the military member’s combat deployment experiences and any associated postdeployment mental health issues (Nash & Litz, 2013). Even prior to postcombat stressors, spouses are exposed to significant and unique stressors associated with the deployment process itself, including XXX (provide an example). Collectively, the potential exposure to secondary trauma, the stress associated with combat deployments, and any postdeployment mental, physical, or psychological issues are serious risks to spouses’ psychological well-being.

## General Statement

Combat operations are one of the military’s distinct duties. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan involved protecting the United States and its allies from foreign governments or groups deemed a threat to national security or to U.S. interests around the world. As of early 2020, over 7,000 U.S. military members had died as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Congressional Research Service, 2020; U.S. Department of Defense, 2020). However, in today’s combat environment, significantly more combat veterans survive critical injuries than in previous conflicts as a result of advances in training, medical treatment, and technology (Woodruff et al., 2018; Yambo et al., 2016).

While higher survival rates are an advantage (Isaacson et al., 2010), a higher number of veterans recovering from a critical combat injury results in more veterans with PTSD, TBIs, and other debilitating mental and physical injuries than in previous conflicts (Franklin, 2009; Isaacson et al., 2010). In addition, military veterans are facing significant stressors, including routine engagement in combat, family separations, long deployments, and physical and emotional injuries received in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom (Williamson & Mulhall, 2009). These stressors were identified in a study of nearly 300,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, in which almost 37% of veterans from wars in Afghanistan received a mental health diagnosis (Seal et al., 2009).

Since 2001, diagnosed cases of mental health disorders increased by 65% among active duty military members (Primack et al., 2017). The most prevalent mental health disorder was PTSD, which saw a 36% increase in new diagnoses between 2002 and 2008 (Seal et al., 2009). A Journal of American Medical Association study (2014) found that rates of PTSD in civilians were 15 times less than rates of PTSD in military members. In Primack et al. (2017), military members deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan showed higher rates of mental health disorders than rates found in nondeployed military members or civilians.

Despite patterns of increased mental health diagnoses, nearly 80% of military members in one study admitted to having problems, but only 50% were interested in seeking psychiatric help and less than 25% actually received treatment (Primack et al., 2017). A study of more than 6,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans showed that nearly 60% exhibiting signs of PTSD did not seek treatment (Hoge et al., 2004). A significant number of veterans suffering from PTSD-like behaviors do not seek mental health treatment based on either real or perceived barriers (Burnam et al., 2009; Vogt, 2011). Veterans not seeking treatment puts military spouses at significant risk of higher levels of psychological distress and familial discord (Monson et al., 2009).

Although PTSD is one of the more prominent mental health issues for combat veterans, some researchers believe the full measure of neurological and psychological stressors associated with combat deployments has yet to be realized in veterans and in their families (Williamson & Mulhall, 2009). Untreated mental health issues would presumably have significantly greater negative impacts on military families, including higher incidences of marital problems, family violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and increased suicide risks (Tanielian et al., 2008). Specifically, these stressors could profoundly decrease spouses’ psychological well-being and quality of life.

Furthermore, since there is typically no specialized deployment training for spouses, these stressors could have even greater negative impacts than what are currently reported in the scientific literature. Spouses of approximately two thirds of military members exhibiting mental health symptoms fail to seek mental health treatment (Wong, 2012). Some military spouses believe reporting mental health problems may negatively impact their spouses’ careers (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2012).

While the negative effects of military combat are widely recognized, there are over 800,000 federal, state, and local law enforcement members engaged in high stress and dangerous situations every day who experience similar effects (Brooks, 2019a, 2019b; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019; Hyland, 2018). These law enforcement officers enforce laws and respond to life-threatening situations while protecting the citizens in their respective jurisdictions.

Law enforcement officers experience significantly more stressors than individuals in many other civilian occupations. While mental health issues for military veterans might receive more research focus, law enforcement officers face similar stressors that can also cause mental health issues. These stressors often manifest through traumatic experiences from external sources as well as efforts to use internal resources to cope with these experiences (Giffin & Sun, 2017). These traumatic experiences may result in higher rates of PTSD, alcohol use, depression, relationship problems, divorce, suicide, and other associated issues.

Military and civilian law enforcement are usually distinct and independent careers. However, individuals in both careers experience the same negative effects associated with exposure to trauma. For the military, trauma may result from prolonged combat during deployments. For civilian law enforcement, trauma may result from daily exposure to a variety of critical incidents. Military members returning from combat deployments to their previous civilian law enforcement professions or to new positions in law enforcement can be plagued with transitioning from one high stress environment to another. During this transition, they must continue to address mental or physical health issues, including PTSD or TBI, that occurred during military service.

When these two typically separate careers combine into one as a military law enforcement veteran, the cumulative and ongoing stress of combat-related issues and the daily trauma of police work could have significantly negative effects on veterans and their families. Family members, whether military or civilian, are often not exposed to similar stressors except through their loved one’s experiences. The fear of whether the military member will be killed in action or suffer a debilitating injury during a combat deployment is one of the most significant stressors military spouses experience. For non-law-enforcement military spouses, this stressor is relieved once military members return home. However, when military members return home to law enforcement positions or obtain these positions after their return, fears of death or critical injury can continue in their spouses.

According to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (2018), there have been nearly 3,000 line-of-duty deaths of U.S. law enforcement officers since the beginning of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. Living with this constant stressor, spouses of military veterans in law enforcement must still cope with the day-to-day stressors of military or civilian life. Numerous studies have shown that significant life stressors are directly associated with increased mental disorders in nonmilitary family members, but the impact of these stressors on spouses and families is underresearched (Mansfield et al., 2011).

## Justification Statement

Spouses of military veterans in law enforcement may face significant challenges. Recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have placed many military spouses in the role of caregiver upon the return of injured military members. While the caregiver role may not be new, the role is significantly different for members who served in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts than in previous wars. These members served extended and multiple combat deployments with very little recovery time between (Mental Health Advisory Team, 2006) and experienced trauma caused by suicide bombers or improvised explosive devices (Baptist et al., 2011). Additionally, wounded combat veterans from these wars are 3 times more likely to survive their injuries than those in previous military engagements (Gartner, 2014). Although this survival rate is very encouraging, it could significantly increase the stressors of spouses who provide care for these wounded veterans.

Some of these veterans may have significant debilitating physical and mental health injuries related to two prominent conditions: TBI and PTSD; Koenigs et al., 2008). Approximately 60% of the injuries sustained during Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom involved TBI-related symptoms (Clark et al., 2007). Atte (2016) described TBI’s effects as “a phenomenon that can have a tremendous toll on caregivers’ well-being and general health” (p. 1). PTSD, the other prominent concern among Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans, has its roots among World War I veterans, in which the condition was known as shell shock (Williamson & Mulhall, 2009). Since that time, there have been numerous scientific studies on PTSD’s effects on military members and their families; however, the primary focus has been on military members or veterans, not on their spouses.

Some may argue that PSTD is one of the most important issues facing veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Unlike the often-visible scars of physical injuries, PTSD often manifests invisibly, even to those personally impacted. PSTD can potentially be even more detrimental than many physical wounds. Historically, military culture and policies have identified mental health problems as a weakness; this fallacy can be problematic in a culture that thrives on duty and honor.

In previous conflicts, military leadership also identified mental health issues as incongruent with a military member’s ability to perform the mission. This sometimes led to the suspension of required security clearances and in some instances, dismissal or discharge from the military. This culture and the lack of physical scarring may have enabled veterans to hide the existence of psychological injuries based on perceived or real barriers to reporting.

The failure to seek help could have a significantly negative impact on military members and their spouses. Not seeking help can exacerbate symptoms and even lead to a related mental health diagnosis for spouses: secondary traumatic stress disorder. This condition is closely related to PTSD and can arise due to exposure to knowledge about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other (Renshaw, 2011).

The general problem is that spouses of military veterans in law enforcement can experience tremendous stress associated with military duties and law enforcement life in general. These stressors can also be exacerbated by combat deployments (C. L. Collins et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2007; Joseph, 2014; Spelman et al., 2012) and the daily stressors of law enforcement (Tuttle et al., 2018), resulting in issues related to spouses’ physical, emotional, and social well-being. One could argue that spouses of military veterans in law enforcement may be a vulnerable population needing further attention in scientific literature.

Military members face the significant stressors of routine engagement in combat, family separations, long deployments, and potential physical and emotional wounds received under harrowing conditions (C. L. Collins et al., 2017; Williamson & Mulhall, 2009). Researchers believe the full measure of neurological and psychological damage associated with combat deployments has yet to be realized in veterans and their families (Franklin, 2009; Williamson & Mulhall, 2009). While military combat operations are undeniably stressful, many combat veterans return home to continued trauma exposure during law enforcement duties (Henry, 2004; Toch, 2002; Violanti et al., 2016). These veterans must encounter the worst of society, often with deadly consequences and negative public perceptions (Graziano, 2019), and must do so with professionalism and complete control of their emotions (Blum, 2002; Fridman et al., 2019).

Law enforcement duties have been categorized as significantly more stressful than those in other occupations (Bartol & Bartol, 2008), with the exception of enlisted military combat veterans (Strauss, 2017). The specific problem is the significant risk these stressors may pose to spouses’ mental and physical health, which in some cases may be equivalent to the trauma experienced by military members (Dekel & Solomon, 2006; Meffert et al., 2014). Because law enforcement officers often experience PTSD on a much higher scale than people in other civilian careers (Bartol & Bartol, 2008), spouses of military veterans in law enforcement are presumably at an even greater risk of experiencing secondary trauma subsequent to combat deployments.

Deployments negatively affect military spouses’ psychological and social well-being (Asbury & Martin, 2012; Levy & Sidel, 2009), resulting in issues including depression, anxiety, and inability to readjust in one’s marriage (Angrist & Johnson, 2000; Eubanks, 2013; Jensen et al., 1996; Jordan et al., 1992; Riggs et al., 1998; Rosen et al., 1993, 1995). In addition to stressors often associated with military veterans who work in law enforcement when they return from deployment, spouses may experience constant fear for members’ safety while they are deployed. Spouses must also transition to primary caretakers for children who presumably also experience deployment stressors. Additionally, spouses may be exposed to repeated household restructuring, possible residential relocation, and innumerable additional military-centric stressors (Everson et al., 2013; Flake et al., 2009; Huebner et al., 2007).

By exploring the perceived and realized needs of spouses of military veterans in law enforcement, results from the present study could help in developing a better understanding of the significant stressors affecting these spouses. Study findings could also inform respective leadership and support personnel on more targeted programs for assisting spouses. The data obtained from this research may also be used to identify methods for detecting secondary trauma symptoms for spouses of military veterans in law enforcement, which may result in improved treatment seeking.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this systematic literature review was to explore relevant research on deployment’s impact on spouses of Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans in law enforcement. Findings from this study could aid a better understanding of the significant stressors experienced by spouses who are dually exposed to trauma from combat deployments and law enforcement occupational stressors. Additionally, study findings could provide information military and law enforcement leadership and counselors could use to better target the needs and realities of spouses of deployed and/or deploying military members.

There is limited scientific literature regarding military veterans in law enforcement. Of the available related literature, the primary focus has been on veteran reintegration to civilian law enforcement duties, not on the potential for ongoing cumulative exposure to trauma. Also, there appeared to be no contemporary studies regarding the manifestation of secondary trauma for spouses of military veterans in law enforcement. By increasing the understanding the collective impact of deployments and law enforcement stressors on these spouses, findings from this study could bring much-needed attention to significant mental and physical health risks for them during deployments and as veterans return to daily law enforcement duties.

## Research Questions

The following research questions (RQs) were addressed in this study:

RQ1: How do military combat deployment stressors impact spouses of Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans?

RQ2: How do law enforcement occupational stressors impact the spouses of law enforcement officers?

## Importance of the Study

Over half of the estimated 2,500,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are married (DoD Military OneSource, 2017; Williams & Mulhall, 2009). This leaves nearly 1,500,000 spouses vulnerable to the stresses of single or multiple deployments in addition to other factors associated with familial disruptions. During deployments, military spouses face distinctive challenges and significant demands that are unlike those experienced in civilian families (DiNola, 2008). Many spouses of combat veterans experience significant stress related to emotional detachment from military members during the deployment. When members return, their spouses may have sole caregiver responsibilities. In some cases, increased stress related to these responsibilities may lead to higher incidents of domestic abuse, decreased sexual intimacy, and struggles to meet financial needs (de Burgh et al., 2011; Galovski & Lyons, 2004).

Researchers have focused on families of combat veterans; however, the circumstances surrounding the Iraq and Afghanistan wars differed significantly from any other conflict in recent history. Some of these differences include a 600% increase in the number of hostile deaths of U.S. military members during Operation Iraqi Freedom than during the Gulf War, significantly more ground troops deployed, length and number of deployments, length of combat actions, and subsequent insurgency (Mansfield et al., 2011). While there are numerous studies focused on the health and well-being of the military members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, there are few studies focused specifically on spouses’ psychological health and well-being (Eaton et al., 2008; Numbers et al., 2011; Riviere & Merrill, 2011), and I did not find any that addressed the needs of military law enforcement spouses.

In a study of female spouses of Iraqi veterans, average scores for depression and anxiety ranged in the 90th percentile, and there was a disturbing 15% suicide rate (Manguno-Mire et al., 2007; Yambo & Johnson, 2014). Military spouses would like relationship-based treatment; however, many believe that seeking help may negatively impact the military member’s career (de Burgh et al., 2011; Hefling, 2010).

## Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The transactional theory of stress and coping posits that stress is a result of the exchange between people and their environments and not simply the result of a single stressful incident (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This exchange encompasses situations in which individuals feel threatened (Basowitz et al., 1955) or are uncomfortable (Mechanic, 1962). There are key factors identified in this theory that directly influence these exchanges and therefore directly and significantly impact how an individual may cope with stress. Factors such as individual capabilities, available resources, and understanding individual abilities and limitations (Lyon, 2000) are key in coping with stress. Findings in the present study may identify factors that affect spouses’ environments and their stress levels.

## Overview of Project Approach

This systematic literature review was an analysis of research on mental health issues and other stressors associated with combat deployments, cumulative exposure to trauma associated with law enforcement duties, and how these stressors and exposure affect spouses of military veterans in law enforcement careers. The systematic literature review approach was chosen for this project based on its focus on analyzing and synthesizing relevant evidence-based academic research and its application in practical situations (Thorpe & Holt, 2008), the results of which could benefit spouses of military veterans in law enforcement.There are key points in systematic literature reviews that should be followed to ensure thoroughness and study relevance: (a) identifying research objectives and questions to be answered; (b) developing strategies for identifying the most relevant studies to include in the review; (c) collecting, reviewing, and analyzing studies to be included and eliminating others; (d) summarizing the analysis; and (e) documenting the results (Khan et al., 2003; Littell & Corcoran, 2010). The value of the systematic literature review could also be key in applying study results to other military spouses experiencing the deployment process and for providing senior military and civilian law enforcement leadership a better understanding of the possible needs of spouses of military veterans in law enforcement.

## Definition of Terms

The following terms were used throughout this study and are defined here for the reader’s convenience.

*Active duty military member*: Active duty military members are current or former military members on full-time active military status or a current or former military member ordered to full-time active military status by the National Guard or reserve components of the U.S. armed forces (Agimi et al., 2019; Bonura & Lovald, 2015).

*Combat deployment*:Combat deployment is the movement of military members from a home station into an area of combat operations (The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military Terms, 2020).

*Combat stress*: Combat stress is emotional, intellectual, physical, and/or behavioral reactions of individuals exposed to stressful events during combat deployments (DoD Dictionary of Military Terms, 2020).

*Cumulative stress*: Cumulative stress can result from continued exposure to adverse life events. It can have mental, physical, and behavioral aspects (Lampert et al., 2016).

*Deployment*:The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military Terms (2020) defines deployment as the movement of military members into and out of an area of military operations. For the present study’s purpose, this term was used specifically regarding movement into and out of an area of combat operations in Iraq and/or Afghanistan.

*Deployment process*:The deployment process consists of multiple phases: predeployment, deployment, postdeployment, and reintegration (Military.com, 2022).

*Military combat veterans*:The Veteran’s Administration (2011) defines combat veterans as active duty, retired, or former military members who served on active duty in theater of combat operations and were honorably discharged.

*Military spouse:*For the purpose of this study, military spouse was defined as the female spouse of a male military member who served in the U.S. armed forces (Dictionary.com, n.d.).

*Military veterans in law enforcement*: In the present study, this term was used to describe military veterans who either returned to law enforcement following discharge or who entered law enforcement following discharge.

*Reserve components*: Reserve components are military members who are not full-time active duty service members but are part of the reserve forces in the Army Reserve, Army National Guard, Naval Reserves, Marine Corps Reserve, Air Force Reserves, Air National Guard, and the Coast Guard Reserves (DOD Defense Manpower Data Center, 2020).

*Secondary trauma*: Secondary trauma is the manifestation of PTSD among people who have contact with traumatized individuals (Meffert et al., 2014).

## Assumptions and Limitations

This study’s focus was on spouses of military members who engaged in combat operations in Iraq and/or Afghanistan and who also work in the law enforcement field in some capacity. One of the first assumptions was that there is inadequate awareness and a lack of educational or support programs provided by military or law enforcement leadership acknowledging the significant threat of secondary traumatic stress to the spouses of military veterans in law enforcement who deploy or have deployed to combat or conflict areas around the world and return to stressors of law enforcement duties. Second, it was assumed that the spouses of military veterans in law enforcement experience unique stressors related to the nature of their spouses’ work and experiences. Military and law enforcement families often feel a kind of bond based on their experiences in military communities and also as law enforcement families. Although these experiences are unique and different, it was assumed that the spouses of military veterans in law enforcement face the same stressors created by the veterans’ experiences in combat and the continued stressors of law enforcement duties. These stressors are shared among military law enforcement spouses at a significant level; however, those stressors also affect military spouses and civilian law enforcement spouses. Based on these assumptions, findings from this study may heighten the awareness of secondary traumatic stress among these spouses and encourage efforts to address these issues in a much larger group of military and civilian agencies.

There were various limitations in the present study. Conducting a systematic literature review did not allow for definitive explanations for particular occurrences or to determine causality even though the study focused on a distinct group––military spouses. Even though the study focused on military spouses, its findings may not be representative of all military spouses or all law enforcement spouses. Additionally, there may be effective individual unit or specific service programs instituted by military or law enforcement leadership that have not been identified in any research.

## Summary

Being a part of the military has inherent realities, obstacles, and hardships for military members and their families. These challenges are unique to military life, and few nonmilitary families will experience them. Military families experience frequent household relocations, significantly lower incomes than their civilian counterparts, having to leave established support systems when moving overseas, spouses sacrificing career and educational options, and other challenges.

Some of the more prominent mental health issues associated with combat deployments and law enforcement careers are PTSD, TBI, depression, substance abuse, and higher suicide rates. Research has shown that military veterans in law enforcement are at a higher risk of being negatively affected by these conditions based on dual exposure to combat experiences and cumulative exposure to significant trauma experienced as law enforcement officers. Studies have also shown that these conditions can manifest as secondary traumatic stress (Greinacher et al., 2019; Meffert et al., 2014; Renshaw, 2011) in the spouses of military veterans in law enforcement.

While military members face specific challenges, members returning to law enforcement duties in the military or in the civilian sector face additional, unique, and significant stressors based on the risks associated with law enforcement duties. When experiencing the combination of combat and stressors, associated with significant risks found in policework, the challenges increase exponentially for military members and their family members.

The impact of deployments and police stressors on the spouses of military veterans in law enforcement was explored in the present study through a systematic review of peer-reviewed studies. The results of this review were used to answer the research questions developed for this study. Chapter II is a review of the literature that informed this study.