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## Contemporary Police Stress: The Impact of the Evolving Socio-Political Context

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### ABSTRACT AND ARTICLE INFORMATION

We interviewed representatives from 110 law enforcement agencies to examine how occupational stressors have changed in recent years. The most frequently cited stressors involved day-to-day enforcement activities that put officers in potentially dangerous situations, the administrative burden and shift work associated with the profession, family and relationship challenges that accompany the job, and the state of police community relations and negative portrayal of the police by the media. Respondents reported that officers experience increased fear and stress due to recent changes in the socio-political environment, which is characterized by strained police-community relations, increased scrutiny associated with the 24-hr news cycle, and the ubiquity of personal recording devices and sharing videos on social media. However, generational shifts in the workforce and efforts to destigmatize mental health care has also changed the landscape of police stress for the better.

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*The wellness and safety of law enforcement officers is critical not only for the officers, their colleagues, and their agencies but also to public safety.*

– President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015, p. 5)

Since the 1970s, a growing body of literature has explored the causes, symptoms, and social and psychological effects of stress on law enforcement officers. The law enforcement profession is associated with high stress levels (Kirkcaldy, Cooper, & Ruffalo, 1995; Stack, 2001; Violanti et al., 2007; Violanti et al., 2009), so officer stress warrants special attention to mitigate its negative effects. Researchers have studied the nature and demands of the work that put police at risk of exposure to a number of acute and chronic stressors (Davey, Obst, & Sheehan, 2001; Martinussen, Richardsen, & Burke, 2007; Newman & Rucker-Reed, 2004). They have found that the time-consuming administrative and legal responsibilities, such as filing reports or attending court dates, is associated with stress as well. What researchers have not examined closely is how the socio-political climate may impact officer wellbeing. This study will examine the impact of high-profile conflicts between the police and the communities they serve and how the generational shifts might impact officer stress using semi-structured interviews with police leadership and other individuals who support officer wellness.

As researchers and policymakers gain a more comprehensive understanding of the types of stressors reported by law enforcement officers, three different types of work-related stress have emerged from the literature: (1) operational stress, (2) organizational stress, and (3) external pressure from the socio-political context, along with the contextual and individual factors that can affect the way the stress is experienced. This study will add to the existing work on police stress in several important ways. First, there have been changes in operations, policy and practice, job demands, technology, crime trends, officer characteristics, police culture, and the socio-political climate that may impact how police experience stress in the past few years. Second, most of the research into police stress examines one (or a few) departments at a time, which may not capture the diversity of experiences across U.S. law enforcement agencies. To accomplish our aims, we relied upon interviews with over 100 law enforcement departments from across the United States to gather information to understand whether and how police stress is changing.

## Literature Review

### Operational Stress

Operational stress refers to stressors that are related to job content or the features of police work inherent to the occupation. When police practitioners, policymakers, and the lay public are asked to report on the aspects of police work that they believe are most stressful, operational stressors are most commonly

cited due to their uniqueness to first responders and public safety officials (Cross & Ashley, 2004; Rees & Smith, 2008). Indeed, the exposure to potentially traumatic experiences and events is higher for law enforcement officers than the general public: Over the course of a career, law enforcement officers may come into contact with deceased persons (Dabney, Copes, Tewksbury, & Hawk-Tourtelot, 2013), be exposed to risks to their personal safety (Woody, 2006), witness violent interactions and respond to natural disasters (Violanti, Castellano, O'Rourke, & Paton, 2006), and manage the results of traumatic events such as traffic accidents or crimes against children (Dabney et al., 2013; Krause, 2009). One survey of law enforcement officers found that the top three stressors in law enforcement are directly related to on-the-job violence: responsibility for an officer-involved shooting, a line-of-duty death of a fellow officer, and survival of a physical attack (Violanti et al., 2009; Violanti & Samuels, 2007).

These acute traumatic events, often described as "critical incidents," are a particular area of concern for law enforcement agencies and other public health officials. A growing awareness of critical incidents and their potential to contribute to more serious mental health issues (such as posttraumatic stress disorder) has resulted in intervention development to reduce negative psychological repercussions of traumatic exposure. However, psychiatric distress varies widely, and the prevalence rate of mental health issues among a population exposed to a critical incident is relatively low (8-15%; Liberman et al., 2002). Recent qualitative studies of law enforcement stress have found that law enforcement professionals often become routinized to seemingly traumatic environments as a result of repeated exposure, which may provide some protection against stress (Dabney et al., 2013).

There has been some debate as to whether police work has become more dangerous and whether law enforcement officers are, in fact, being exposed to more traumatic events. In the past two decades, the number of officers killed and assaulted has decreased slightly, and according to FBI statistics, they are responding to fewer violent crimes and traffic fatalities (see Table 1). The data collected on officers who were killed and assaulted in the line of duty over the past 20 years also paints a picture of conditions remaining the same or even being safer, and researchers have not identified an increase in the most serious violence directed against officers or in response to the recent conflicts between the police and the community (Maguire, Nix, & Campbell, 2017). The distribution of exposure to these traumatic events among officers is unknown, but it is likely that certain officers experience much higher rates of exposure than others. However, these are only a few of the sources of

operational stressors; there are no data that comprehensively quantify how much trauma an

officer is exposed to and whether it has changed over the past decade.

**Table 1: Traumatic Event Exposure among Law Enforcement Officers in the United States Over Time**

	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015
Officers Killed*	55	51	55	56	41
Officers Assaulted*	46,695	56,054	57,546	53,469	50,212
Homicides**	21,606	15,586	16,740	14,789	15,192
Violent Crime**	1,789,792	1,425,486	1,390,745	1,246,248	1,160,664
Rape**	97,470	90,178	94,472	84,767	94,717
Traffic Fatalities***	37,221	37,409	43,443	22,273	22,441

Note: For officers killed, homicides, violent crime, rape, and traffic fatalities, the number presented identifies events, not the number of officers who were exposed. Indeed, one officer may have been exposed to multiple events of a certain type whereas another may never encounter any of these during the course of his or her career.

\* From Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted

\*\* From Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Reports

\*\*\* From National Highway Transportation Security Administration Crash Statistics

**Organizational Stress**

Despite law enforcement officers’ exposure to acute trauma and critical incidents, much of the recent literature exploring law enforcement stress has coalesced around organizational issues as the primary contributor to officer stress. Organizational stress is characterized by “job context,” or the characteristics of the organization that affect an officer’s daily responsibilities, career prospects, and experience among peers (Shane, 2010). Issues such as administrative burden, interpersonal conflict, and scheduling are examples of organizational stress that officers across rank and country identify as primary stressors in their work (Davey et al., 2001; McCarty et al., 2007). These stresses have been linked to interpersonal discord both within and outside the workplace, thereby impairing positive health benefits derived from a robust social support network (Ortega, Brenner, & Leather, 2007).

Administrative burden has been cited as a factor affecting law enforcement officer stress since at least the late 1980s. This includes the growing demands for detailed reports to help support criminal convictions, increases in documentation requirements as part of increasing accountability standards, and other paperwork requirements that necessitate the investment of an officer’s time and concentration. Especially when combined with mandatory overtime or increased frequency of shift work, officers cite paperwork as a significant stressor (Abdollahi, 2002; Zhao, He, & Lovrich, 2002). Shift work is another organizational factor that disrupts sleep schedules,

leads to stress, and limits the ability of officers to plan or enjoy time with family members (Anshel, Umscheid, & Brinthead, 2013; Gelber, 2003; National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center 2008; Page, 2010; Violanti, 2012; Violanti et al., 2008; Wilkins Newman & Rucker-Reed, 2004).

Additionally, organizational culture and management have also been identified as significant factors affecting officer stress, job satisfaction, and well-being. As summarized by Wilkins Newman and Rucker-Reed (2004),

the major stressors for Deputy U.S. Marshals were found to be those things associated with organizational factors, such as problems with management, bad bosses and the work environment, instead of those issues related to risk of bodily harm or encounters with violence and human misery. (p. 637)

These findings are consistent with several other studies that have found that inept management (Garner, 2008; Ranta & Sud, 2008), failure to recognize the accomplishments of officers (Cebulak, 2001; Loftus, 2008; Willetts, 2009), the provision of too little time to conduct a task (Martinussen et al., 2007; McCarty et al., 2007; Ranta & Sud, 2008), lack of effective communication (Bonnar, 2000; Fox, 2007; Gelber, 2003; Mullins, 2001), and related issues have a negative effect on officer morale and contribute to stress. There are no data on whether organizational stressors have meaningfully changed over the past

decade. However, in the age of increased accountability on both the organizational and the officer level, there is reason to believe that administrative burden and paperwork have become more complex and demanding (Walker & Archbold, 2013).

### **Socio-Political Context of Policing**

Stress can also come from how officers are treated by the network of people and organizations to whom they are accountable, including the political establishment, the public, and their friends and family. Accountability to each of these groups can affect an officer's stress outside of the organizational or operational concerns of the daily beat. Officers report that political pressure to reform the agency and the policy changes to achieve various (sometimes conflicting) goals are significant pressures that can contribute to stress (Can, Hendy, & Karagoz, 2015; Ortega et al., 2007; Sklansky, 2005). Public expectations and their treatment of officers can also contribute to officer stress, as declines in public respect or regard for officers can lead to feelings of inadequacy or derogation (Antoniou, 2009; Cebulak, 2001; Ozanne-Smith & Routley, 2010; Page, 2010; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003). Finally, friends and family often have expectations that officers are unable to meet due to the demands of the job (e.g., inability to attend family events due to a shift), leading to stress about disappointing loved ones (Chhabra & Chhabra, 2013; Torres, Maggard, & Torres, 2003; Woody, 2006).

Public confidence in, and support of, the police has decreased as racial tensions over use of force have grown, especially among racial/ethnic minority groups. According to a 2015 Gallup Poll, only roughly one half of Americans (52%) expressed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the police, the lowest level in the 22 years that Gallup has polled on that question (Jones, 2015). This has had a detrimental impact on law enforcement officers. According to a 2016 nationally-representative poll by PEW, the majority of officers report that their jobs have become increasingly difficult and dangerous. PEW found that between 80% and 90% of officers reported that high profile incidents between police and African Americans have made policing more challenging and dangerous, with a vast majority of officers reporting that interactions between African Americans and the police have become increasingly tense. This has resulted in law enforcement officers being more concerned about their own safety (Pew Research Center, 2017). Nix and Wolfe (2017) similarly found that law enforcement officers reported that recent negative publicity made their jobs more dangerous and also led them to be less motivated.

### **Why is Police Stress Important?**

Unmanaged stress in law enforcement officers has been linked with anxiety disorders (Reichenberg & MacCabe, 2007; Smith, Wolfe-Clark, & Bryan, 2016; Wilkins Newman & Rucker-Reed, 2004), depression (Berg, Hem, Lau, & Ekeberg, 2006; He, Zhao, & Ren, 2005; Reichenberg & MacCabe, 2007; Violanti & Samuels, 2007; Waters & Ussery, 2007), sleep problems (Gerber, Hartmann, Brand, Holsboer-Trachsler, & Pühse, 2010; Violanti et al., 2007; Violanti & Samuels, 2007; Waters & Ussery, 2007), and anger management issues (Marshall, 2001). Suicide ideation has similarly been linked to both acute (e.g., sleep disruption) and distal (e.g., depression) effects of stress resulting from law enforcement work (Gerber et al., 2010; Violanti, 2012). High rates of officer stress are correlated with low job satisfaction and poor job performance (Cross & Ashley, 2004; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003), high rates of burnout (Berg et al., 2006; Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006; Loo, 2004; Martinussen et al., 2007; McCarty et al., 2007), and high staff turnover (Adams & Buck, 2010; Smith, Wareham, & Lambert, 2014).

Police practitioners and researchers alike have suggested that police culture itself may contribute to feelings of stress among officers by inhibiting healthy coping due to the resulting expectations and social pressures. In this model, police culture places a high premium on emotional stability and "mental toughness," conversely censoring expressions of distress, sadness, or anger (Chhabra & Chhabra, 2013; Page, 2010; Smith et al., 2016). With few avenues of expression remaining, studies have found an increase in cynicism (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006; Cebulak, 2001; Martinussen et al., 2007), social isolation (Sklansky, 2005; Woody, 2006), and a limited ability to connect meaningfully in interpersonal relationships (Garner, 2008; Ortega et al., 2007).

While there is a robust literature on the stressors associated with law enforcement, some deficiencies need addressing. First, the research does not address how law enforcement stressors have and continue to change over time as millennials join the workforce. Second, the impact of the socio-political context of policing has not been explored, and there is reason to believe it is becoming an increasingly important source of stress.

### **Method**

We conducted 110 semi-structured interviews between May and December 2017 with law enforcement agencies across the United States for a study funded by the National Institute of Justice that examined policies and programs to address police

suicide. Our sampling approach was derived from situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) and employed maximum variation sampling – not with the goal of obtaining representativeness for generalizability purposes. In this process, sampling is done iteratively to maximize the heterogeneity with respect to relevant themes or characteristics that evolve during the interview process. In this case, we attempted to maximize the variation around how the department approached officer health and wellness and the programs, policies, and specific services they offer to promote resilience.

### Sample

The five sampling waves were constructed using two techniques: purposive convenience sampling, starting with nine agencies where project team members had established relationships, and stratified random sampling of eight agencies within four geographic regions using the Census of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies. The second sample wave included seven agencies that were mentioned by interviewees during the first round of interviews as collaborators or model programs, and an additional 25 were randomly selected from the CSLLEA. In Wave 3, we selected 36 agencies with four from each of the nine rural designation areas; we also contacted three additional agencies we learned about during earlier interviews. In Wave 4, we selected representatives from state police agencies in the ten states with, as of 2015, the highest overall suicide rates and sought interviews with the 25 agencies with the largest number of full time sworn officers with full arrest powers that we had not already interviewed. Invitations for the fifth and final wave of interviews were sent to the 30 sheriff departments with the largest jail populations, based on the Census of Jail Facilities, 2006.

Outreach began with a letter sent by Federal Express to the agency director or chief, including a one page project description and a list of topics to be included in the one hour interview we were requesting with the individual most informed about the department's workforce wellness concerns and initiatives. We placed follow-up phone calls to the office within four days of the letter arrival to schedule

an interview. The head of the agency to whom we had sent our materials referred us to the employee who was most involved with department wellness matters (e.g., psychological services divisions, human resources offices, directors of peer support programs and individuals charged with workforce health and wellness initiatives). We also engaged in follow up with non-responders; repeated calls were made and email messages were sent to try to obtain an interview with every sampled agency. We could not identify any trends in the refusals, other than departments with fewer than 10 officers were less likely to respond.

In total, we invited 177 agencies to participate in our interviews, and 110 completed an interview. Our respondents were each identified as the person in the department with the most knowledge about officer wellness. This person varied by department. A little over one-third of the interviewees were chief-level executives, including police chiefs and assistant chiefs, and sheriffs and undersheriffs of smaller agencies (36%); another third were commissioned law enforcement officers who were in charge of wellness/peer support/critical incident response within their departments (12% captains, 15% lieutenant, 6% officers); 20% represented a direct service provider such as a psychologist or civilian peer support coordinator); and we do not have information on the specific job position on the remaining 11%. We interviewed agencies representing 30 states across all geographic regions of the United States in a range of urban (81% of our local police departments were from urban areas vs. 74% of the overall US sampling frame) and rural areas (with almost all our primary state department having jurisdictions that include very rural areas). The Sheriffs' Offices were a mix of urban and rural, with half from counties with dense urban centers and the other half located in more rural areas. The total response rate was 62% (response rate by wave = 71%, 43%, 51%, 89%, 53%, respectively). While we cannot make claims about generalizability, the agencies we interviewed cover the range of many of the relevant characteristics we maximized for the population of state and local law enforcement agencies (see Table 2 for a small number of comparisons).

**Table 2: Selected Characteristics of Final Sample vs. 2013 Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS)**

	<b>Local Police Department</b> <b>Our Sample: n=57</b> <b>2013 LEMAS: n=1540*</b>	<b>Sherriff Office</b> <b>Our Sample: n=31</b> <b>2013 LEMAS: n=602*</b>	<b>Primary State Department</b> <b>Our Sample: n=22</b> <b>2013 LEMAS: n=50*</b>
<b>Operating Budget</b>			
<b>Our Sample Range</b>	298,919 – 1,323,114,147	700,000 – 729,888,190	23,000,000 – 18,000,000
<b>LEMAS Range</b>	650,000 – 4,612,690,000	575,5000- 2,806,127,000	14,197,000 – 1,902,730,000
<b>Our Sample Median</b>	70,100,000	128,158,629	18,819,295
<b>LEMAS Median</b>	8,000,000	10,778,600	139,536,200
<b>FT Sworn Officers</b>			
<b>Our Sample Range</b>	3 – 36,023	10-9,461	204 – 7202
<b>LEMAS Range</b>	11 – 34,454	11 – 9,266	143 - 7234
<b>Our Sample Median</b>	610	524	1,235
<b>LEMAS Median</b>	57	72	707
<b>FT Civilians</b>			
<b>Our Sample Range</b>	0 – 13,903	2 – 7,141	35 – 4,583
<b>LEMAS Range</b>	0 – 14,635	0 – 7,692	35 – 5,039
<b>Our Sample Median</b>	176	867	674
<b>LEMAS Median</b>	13	47	441

\* We limited the sample to departments with more than 10 full time sworn officers.

### Interview and Coding

The interviews were conducted over the phone by one of the research team and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interview protocol was developed to facilitate a semi-structured conversation and covered multiple domains with various prompts. Topics included police officer stressors, programs and policies in place to promote officer mental health, access to care and education, and organizational structure and support for officer mental health and wellness. Our goal in this analysis was to identify the current stressors facing sworn law enforcement officers. Thus, we analyzed the responses to the following open-ended questions: (1) What kind of things do officers/deputies talk about as stressful? (2) Have there been any changes in what is discussed among officers as stressful in the past couple of years? (3) If an officer wanted to go seek mental health care, would s(he) feel comfortable doing so? Why or why not?

To support content categorization and streamline analysis, transcript content was coded descriptively and thematically using a standardized codebook. The codebook was developed in two phases: (1) The team used a theory-based approach to codebook design by organizing a hierarchical list of topics, subtopics, and concepts drawn from the research questions and interview guide, and (2) the team applied a grounded-theory based approach; three coders coded up to five transcripts each, identified content that was not reflected in the theory-based scheme, and revised the

codebook. The coders completed this iterative coding exercise three times, at which point no additional data were identified as outliers to the coding scheme. All transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis program that enables collaborative and team-based coding. Because some interview content could relate to more than one topic or theme, coders were instructed to apply more than one code, if relevant, to a given excerpt so that content could be analyzed across codes. Coders met weekly to discuss their progress and questions about code application; areas of disagreement were resolved via consensus.

### Analysis

For this analysis, we used a total of 571 coded statements: 338 coded statements by 110 interviewees referred to stressors faced by law enforcement agents in the field, 125 statements from 77 respondents that described changes in stressors over time (which may or may not line up with what they reported when they described “current stressors”), and 108 statements from 67 interviewees that described the stigma (or lack of) associated with mental health treatment seeking behavior. We examined the data in two ways. First, we described the current stressors by types as identified in the previous literature (i.e., operational, organizational, personal, and socio-political) and described the themes that emerged within each category. Second, we examined whether there were differences in stressors, changes in stressors, or stigma associated with mental health treatment, over time. We

also conducted several sensitivity analyses of the modal themes by department type (local law enforcement, sheriff department, or state and federal law enforcement), department size (fewer than 20, 21-50, 51-100, 101-500, or over 500 full time sworn officers), and respondent type (chief-level executive, commissioned officer, or direct service provider). There were no differences in the modal themes between any of these categories; thus, we only present the modal themes for the entire sample.

**Methodological Limitations**

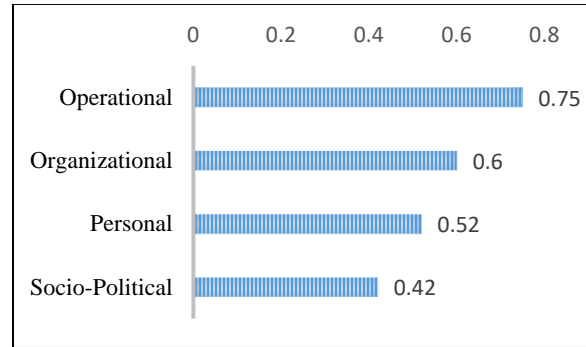
Our study approach has several limitations. Although we obtained a diverse sample with respect to the range of mental health and wellness services offered to police officers, it was not meant to be generalizable to the entire population of agencies. We also did not ask interviewees to rank various stressors, so our results and discussion focus on what they prioritized in our conversations with respect to how much they discussed various issues, which may not represent either the frequency or severity of various stressors. We also asked interviewees to report on changes, which may be subject to recall bias. And finally, while we specifically targeted those who would have the most information about officer stress and wellness, the departments ultimately determined who would participate in the interview.

**Results**

**Current Stressors**

The most frequently discussed stressors fell into the *operational* category, which included stressors such as critical and traumatic incidents and events, responding to and enforcing traffic violations and accidents, responding to calls for service, and other law enforcement-specific duties (see Figure 1). The next two common types of stressor discussed were organizational and personal in nature: *organizational*

*stressors* including administrative burden, pressure from supervisors, and shift work, while the (somewhat related) *personal stressors* contained family and relationship challenges along with financial difficulties. Finally, the *socio-political context* of law enforcement work, including local police/community relations and the media portrayal of police were the least discussed type of stressor.



**Figure 1: Proportion of Interviewees who Discussed Different Types of Stressors**

**Operational stressors.** These included comments about the stress that comes from responding to potentially dangerous calls for service (which can involve domestic violence and/or weapons), investigating criminal incidents, assisting and/or questioning community members, dealing with traffic accidents, using detention powers, along with other possibly unsafe activities (see Table 3). We were told that law enforcement officers must remain prepared to face a wide range of potentially traumatic events with no notice, and over their career, this vigilance and incremental exposure can be very detrimental. In addition to being exposed to such traumatic events, participants discussed the institutional barriers to healthy coping, including a lack of time to process and recover from a situation and the fear of appearing weak or reporting mental health issues that could negatively impact their jobs.

**Table 3: Current Operational Officer Stressor Discussed by Interview**

Stressor	Thematic Description
<i>Responding to crime</i> n=65	The routine stress felt from routine police work, such as responding to calls for service, investigating complaints, and patrolling
<i>Exposure to trauma</i> n=32	Exposure to traumatic circumstances such as securing crime scenes with dead bodies, interviewing child victims of sexual violence, dealing with domestic violence survivors, traffic accidents and mass fatalities, and active shooter situations
<i>Violence against police</i> n=10	Reports of police ambushes and other violence against the police were described as creating an atmosphere of fear and the perception that officers and their families must remain suspicious of the community and constantly vigilant

This quote illustrates the category:

I have troopers respond to a call when someone is trapped in a burning car, burning to death, and there's not much you can do, [the trooper] can't get the person out of the car. That's distressing. That's extreme. What I've learned is depending on the person, we all find different things to be distressing, children being injured or killed is disturbing for most. People suffering and not much to do.

**Organizational stressors.** This next group were the second most discussed, which included pressure from management, administrative duties, and the nature of shift work (see Table 4). As one interviewee put it, "the number one stressor is the paperwork itself." These were described as similar in nature to job frustrations and stressors experienced in other professions, but interviewees reported that the stress is

amplified (or at least their impact is) because of the intensity of the job. Shift work, long hours, and unpredictable schedules were frequently discussed as major organizational stressors. Sleep deprivation as a result of these scheduling realities was also a great cause of concern expressed by interviewees, as it causes both significant cognitive and motor impairments, and has an even more destructive effect on mood (Pilcher & Huffcutt, 1996). As one respondent described the problem, "workload, the schedule itself. We're the only agency that allows to do double-back (3 pm to 11 pm, then 7 am to 3 pm) shifts. With those schedules, you're sleeping 5-6 hours at best." Additionally, the politics of law enforcement add an additional layer of stress due to the expectation that police and other government actors must be infallible. These concerns echo earlier work on officer stress, but some report that they are, in fact, getting worse.

**Table 4: Current Organizational Officer Stressors Discussed by Interview**

Stressor	Thematic Description
<i>Overtime and long hours</i> n=38	Shift work, unpredictable schedules, mandatory overtime, and overnight shifts were discussed as generating a great deal of stress that impacted both the officer's personal lives, mood, and cognitive and motor functions
<i>Pressure from management</i> n=26	Pressures from management, including to be more efficient, work more, and be more accountable, along with the hierarchical structure and politics of the organization
<i>Administrative duties</i> n=20	The administrative burden of law enforcement includes paperwork, multiple information systems, lengthy reports with copious entry fields, and other time-consuming, detail-oriented reporting requirements

As on one respondent reported,

In the last 15 years, even what used to be a routine report to take has now been overcomplicated to a point you can't just go to a call and document a short report. There's 25 things on a checklist you have to go to.

**Personal Stressors.** This theme described the strain that the job places on officers' personal and family lives and was the third most mentioned stress category (see Table 5). Many interviewees brought up family problems that were either caused by the job directly or perceived to be associated with the job, such as alcohol use, high divorce rates, financial strain, challenging and unpredictable childcare needs, and inability to socialize because they always feel they are

on the job. This theme included statements about schedules that barred a healthy work-life balance, limited time for the family to spend together, issues with spouses and children, and the feeling that officers are expected to prioritize their jobs over family. The schedule challenge inherent in law enforcement was reported to be a huge source of these problems, with officers missing important family and life events, causing alienation from their spouses and children, along with other associated complications. This problem was described as one of "work life balance from overtime and shift work, and then going home and shifting gears to kids and wife after such a negative environment" and "missing important family events due to scheduling."



**Table 5: Current Personal Officer Stressors**

Stressor	Thematic Description
<i>Family and home life</i> n=56	How the job leads to stress in their personal lives including time away from their families, problems in their marriages, challenges with childcare, inability to disengage from work, and alcohol misuse
<i>Financial strain</i> n=27	The low salary for law enforcement officers was described as a source of stress, and particularly insufficient in areas with higher costs of living

**Socio-political stressors.** The next grouping was derived from the social and environmental context of policing and was discussed quite frequently as well with comments about relationships with the community and negative media attention (see Table 6). Most of these statements expressed the challenges with police-community relations and a perceived lack of support from the public, making policing more difficult. Comments such as “officers feel like they aren’t very supported by their communities,” officers “don’t get a lot of respect from local community

members,” and “there is a nationwide climate, with attacks on police, which has left us with feelings of hurt that people don’t trust us,” typify this type of stressor. Another subtheme was the increased scrutiny of their actions by the media, which was also reported to cause stress among officers, particularly the dominant presentation that the police are not using their authority appropriately. Per one interviewee, “the trend of anti-law enforcement support as far as the negative image through social media outlets and media in general” is a source of great stress for his officers.

**Table 6. Current Socio-Political Officer Stressors by Interview Frequency**

Stressor	Thematic Description
<i>Negative media portrayal</i> n=31	The negative portrayal of police by the media. Additionally, social media and the 24-hr news cycle were described as amplifying this negative portrayal.
<i>Police-community relations</i> n=23	The relationship between the police and their community, including frequent displays of disrespect and uncooperative communities

**Recent Change in Stressors**

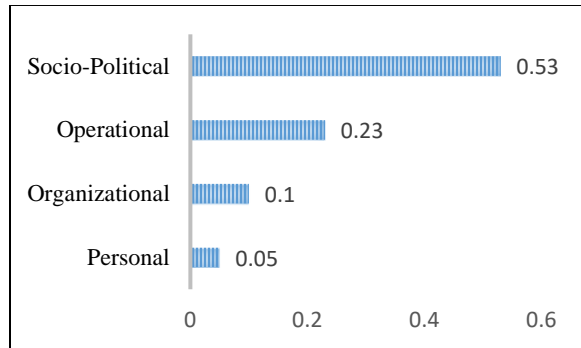
The majority of comments about how law enforcement stressors have changed in recent years revolved around negative media and relationships with the community, followed by the changing nature of police work, officer-involved shootings, exposure to acute trauma, and pressure from management. There were very few mentions of the changing nature or intensity of stress related to overtime or shift work, financial issues, home or personal matters, or administrative duties. When respondents were asked about how stressors changed, they focused much more heavily on changes in the socio-political context than in changes in the actual day-to-day job responsibilities, as seen in Figure 2.

These comments described a new age (or return to an older age) of policing where community mistrust and conflict create several challenges for law enforcement officers: charges of widespread racial bias and excessive use of force against minorities, a perceived lack of safety and feeling that they may be subject to violence, and a belief that every action is

being scrutinized and that they are being set up for failure by the media. An increase in negative media portrayal of the police since the protests in Ferguson, MO, was frequently mentioned as a turning point in the media narrative, and four interrelated subthemes emerged.

The first subtheme, **strained police-community relations**, often attributed to the Black Lives Matter movement, which is perceived to have caused (unfair) negative publicity that has been generalized to all police and makes them targets for violence (n=35 interviews described increasingly strained relationships related to perceived increases in excessive use of force and/or racially-biased actions, with 16 of those interviews mentioning the Black Lives Matter movement by name as the source). Typical comments were, “the new stress is the Black Lives Matter; we had a demonstration in town. Officers are frustrated because they don’t feel like they treat anyone badly based on race,” and “they [the officers] talk about what’s going on in the nation, Black Lives Matter, and people not having any concern about law enforcement officers’ lives, people

running their mouths.” Another interviewee expressed, “the Black Lives Movement, that’s the stressful thing right now. Guys on road are worried about ambush, [so we] get more than one officer on the scene, pay more attention to the alarm call.”



**Figure 2: Proportion of Interviewees who Discussed Change in Different Types of Stressors**

The second subtheme was **increased media scrutiny** of every police action, which places an unattainably high expectation on officer actions ( $n=40$ ). Interviewees reported that law enforcement must now worry about how their actions will appear on camera that will inevitably be dissected after the fact by lay people without the understanding or training to draw informed conclusions. Interestingly, many respondents emphasized how this increased attention on their work made officers more likely to “second guess themselves... even though they are doing the tactics the way they are trained, [they are] getting scrutinized.” Two phenomena were described as being responsible for this – the 24-hour news cycle and the social media.

The **24-hour news cycle** and **partisan reporting** creating an appetite for polarizing stories about law enforcement was another subtheme that emerged. According to the interviewees, the need for constant content leads to newscasters having to fill airtime with opinions, speculation, and unsubstantiated conclusions about police actions without proper investigation or vetting: “We talk about good shots bad shots and the media’s going to report on the broad spectrum; I mean I have to be cognizant of that ideology of news reporting.” According to another participant, “stress that staff endure today is much greater than 15 years ago because of the 24/7 news cycle, the intense scrutiny involved in any significant altercation, and the fear and hate mongering media.”

And finally, interviewees reported that **social media** and the ubiquity of personal videotaping capabilities create an atmosphere where every police action can be reviewed out of context with the potential to become a viral news story. For instance,

“[We are] under a greater microscope due to phones, social media, and technology. Most civilians don’t want to see what law enforcement sees and now [get] upset as they are seeing it.” Other respondents echoed this concern and noted that, “You’re always watched, [with] that constant awareness that someone could be recording you,” and “now, when officers are on patrol they can be filmed by the public and are concerned about media exposure.”

Interestingly, while they reported these socio-political stressors as affecting policing in general and weighing heavily on their officers’ minds, many interviewees reported that none of these problems were specifically present in their communities. According to one interviewee,

in past 6 months to a year, with Black Lives Matter, there is increased worry about [the] general view of community towards law enforcement; in the whole agency – they see so much on TV – and all cops get lumped together.

A large proportion of respondents reported that while police-community relations are strained at the national level, which hurts their morale, they enjoyed good relationships with their local communities:

A current trend is societal ideas of law enforcement oppression. We’re here to oppress. We’re not here to help.... The media leads you to believe there’s not a lot of support [for the police], but in the community, there’s a lot of support. The community shows a lot of support, but if you put on the TV, there is lots of negative portrayal.

In at least one community, the interviewee reported that the negative publicity brought the police and community closer: “90% [of the community members] are happy to have the police department and are supportive. When there was a lot of bashing of the police, we are getting coffee cakes and supportive letters. It has strengthened our community.” However, in another location even where community relations were reported to be strong, the national media coverage was reported to cause a great deal of damage, “deputies are focused on pressures, feeling from what is perceived as a lack of support from the public based on what they’re seeing on the TV every day. The reality is the support we’ve seen from community is tremendous.”

Respondents also mentioned that increased workloads, officer shortages, and new criminal threats are producing more stress than in the past. Specifically, dealing with cybercrime, terrorism, active shooters, drug epidemics, and mentally ill community members were all described as newer

challenges that are causing increased stress in officers: “There is a new fear of cybercrime and terrorism – changes in society and criminal behavior. We are more responsible for the vulnerability of others in general – this is new.” Increased reporting duties, administrative oversight, and requirements from prosecutors’ officers were also cited as contributing to the stress profile in a different way in the past several years, although these were discussed much less often than the socio-political challenges described above: “Much more stressful than 20 years ago when I started. There is more civilian oversight, more paperwork, more demands from prosecutors.”

Finally, interviewees also detailed how law enforcement officers cope with stressors and how recent **changes in policing culture and generational shifts** in the workforce have altered some of the factors that impact coping ( $n=68$  interviews). The vast majority of interviewees reported a change in policing culture that is becoming more supportive of officers when they experience stress and putting up fewer barriers to accessing care. Over 85% of the individual statements described a reduction in the stigma associated with mental health care within the last few years, with only 15% describing it as remaining the same. Notably, not one statement indicated that the problem was getting worse. Much of this change is attributed to a generational shift in the workforce and deliberate efforts from command staff:

The newer officers that are coming into the department have no problem sharing the fact that they’re seeking treatment for mental health-related issues or going to counseling. Some of the older officers are more skeptical.

Particularly over the past 5-8 years, the approach has changed significantly. It used to be the mentality of suck it up, do your job, you need to be tough. Now it’s shifted more toward you [still] have to be tough, but want to make sure that you have the resources you need to go through it. Our stance is someone in our department has probably been through what you’re going through, so if you let us know what’s going on, we don’t need to know the details, but let us know so we can get you help.

What has contributed to lessening the stigma? Making some things mandatory. “You just went through this incident, you have to go to EAP.” This is not a choice, you go. And that way, the other people can’t say “he’s weak, he talked to a shrink,” because he had no choice. From there, “oh, this wasn’t too bad.” And a lot of them continue their visits with counselors. And us

[command staff] being around and knowing that peer support will show up and do what we do. Initially it was a battle to be accepted, now since a lot has become ... not a matter of being macho. It’s taken away [the stigma].

While the majority of interviewees believe that the stigma is decreasing and the culture is becoming more accepting, there were also many who reported that they still have a long way to go to get to a place where they believe it should be. As one interviewee put in, “We’re better than we were a year ago, but still have work ahead. There is still distrust and discomfort.”

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our interviewees echo many of the findings of earlier research on police stress, finding similar themes in operational, organizational, and socio-political stressors. Our study also highlights three new themes in how stress is changing due to (1) the current socio-political environment, (2) generational shifts in the workforce, and (3) recent efforts to destigmatize mental health care treatment. Our study participants also consistently reiterated the message from the Presidential Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing (2015):

The ‘bulletproof cop’ does not exist. The officers who protect us must also be protected—against incapacitating physical, mental, and emotional health problems as well as against the hazards of their job. Their wellness and safety are crucial for them, their colleagues, and their agencies, as well as the well-being of the communities they serve. (p. 62)

Respondents reported that officers face many types of stressors that fall into the categories of operational, organizational, personal, and socio-political. The most frequently cited operational stressors involved day-to-day enforcement activities that put officers in potentially unsafe situations including responding to routine calls for service and enforcing traffic violations and responding to the less frequent critical and traumatic incidents and events. In the organizational category, administrative burden, pressure from supervisors, and shift work were described as large sources of stress. Family, relationship, and financial challenges were reported as being personal stressors. The current state of police community relations and negative portrayal of the police by the media were also described as being a significant source of stress in policing. Except for the particular socio-political stressors resulting from

recent conflicts between the police and community, these have all been identified and discussed at length in the previous literature on police stress.

**The current socio-political environment** was discussed at great length by participants. While previous research had identified this as being a source of stress for officers, it has not received the same amount of scrutiny as other factors. Respondents described this as a new stress and attributed it to a several causes. First, they reported that the strained police-community relationships that have been highlighted in the national news make it appear that all communities distrust their local police forces. While respondents consistently cited these national news media stories as causing friction between the police and the communities at large, they often offered the caveat that their local departments maintain good relationships with the communities they serve. They most frequently associated the negative sentiment between police and the community with the Black Lives Matter movement. Second, they reported that the “over scrutiny” of police actions by the media sets up impossibly high standards, leading police to second guess their enforcement actions. The respondents reported that even when police faultlessly follow procedures they are still blamed for negative outcomes and fear being publicly scapegoated, even if they are eventually exonerated by the courts. The fear of ending up being publicly criticized has been reported to cause hesitation and the reluctance to follow use of force guidelines that may put officer lives at risk. Third, the 24-hour news cycle and cable news channels, which must fill more air time with speculation, exacerbates the negative perception of officers, according to interviewees. They stated that content must be lengthened and so called “experts” are brought on the shows to theorize and debate prior to evidence being collected and analyzed. This spreads misinformation and further sensationalizes conflict, leading police to feel defensive and unappreciated. Fourth, interviewees reported the increase in social media and personal videorecorders that have the potential to turn each interaction into a viral new story. Participants reported that having community members recording interactions and sharing them creates a heightened stressful atmosphere, causing officers to be concerned about how they will appear on film that can be edited unfavorably.

These developments in the socio-political context in which police officers work has been assessed empirically as well. Two recent studies confirm that the majority of police officers report that high profile incidents between the African American community and the police have made the job more difficult and dangerous (Nix & Wolfe, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2017). Our study identified four subthemes in this area

– the perceived lack of support from the community (with specific references to the Black Lives Matter movement), increased media scrutiny, the 24-hour news cycle, and social media:

[I’ve] been a police officer for 20 years. In the past, the people that didn’t like us were people doing wrong. The anti-cop sentiment wasn’t that bad. There was some animosity prior to 9/11, when it got better, but it’s turned really bad in the past 2 or 3 years. Social media is the biggest issue that we face. People will hang you in the court of public opinion before all the facts are in.

This was discussed as having a negative impact on officer stress and perhaps causing hesitation in the field, which put officers at greater risk of injury, but its impact on officer decision-making or safety has not been explored:

Primarily it is the negative attitude toward policing that is prevalent in media and federal government. Everyone feels under scrutiny and [our] biggest concern is that someone will hesitate because of this pressure when he should be keeping himself safe.

Our study also points out that **generational shifts in the workforce** should not be overlooked when examining the epidemiology of work-related stress. Much of the research on police stress has examined officers from previous generations, yet there may be something different about the new generation of recruits’ perspectives on mental health. Research into the mental health and stress profile of the younger workforce does reinforce the need to study this group separately, as they have been identified as having different strengths and needs from prior generations of workers (Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012; Espinoza & Ukleja, 2016; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). In the words of one interviewee:

The work is much more stressful than when I started 20 years ago, there is more civilian oversight, more paperwork, more demands from prosecutors. I wonder about the younger generations – they are highly educated and have life experiences, which makes me think that their expectations for themselves and their resilience may be higher than a generation ago.

The interviews did not specifically tease out the differences in stressors by generation, but it naturally came up in conversations. The majority of these mentions were with respect to newer officers being more open with their feelings and

receptive to mental health care. They noted that the culture is changing, both due to a deliberate effort by management and generational shifts in attitudes toward work and mental health.

**Efforts to destigmatize mental health care** and encouraging overall wellness within the policing profession were discussed at length in the interviews, with the majority of interviewees responding that the culture within their department was becoming more open and supportive of their officers. Other scholarly work highlights the strategies currently in place to promote officer wellness, including group debriefings or check ins after critical incidents and/or other traumatic events, peer support programs, and hiring psychologists or other mental health professionals into the department to provide services (Anshel et al., 2013; Arnetz, Nevedal, Lumley, Backman, & Lublin, 2009; Church & Robertson, 1999; Dowling, Moynihan, Genet, & Lewis, 2006; Ramchand et al., 2018).

Respondents described a change in culture that is promoting healthy coping with stressors, and destigmatizing mental health care is a move in the direction recommended by the Presidential Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing. In May 2015, the Task Force asserted that overall wellness is paramount to sound decision making and that poor physical or psychological health create a danger to the community. They also concluded that

the most important factor to consider when discussing wellness and safety is the culture of law enforcement, which needs to be transformed. Support for wellness and safety should permeate all practices and be expressed through changes in procedures, requirements, attitudes, and behaviors. An agency work environment in which officers do not feel they are respected, supported, or treated fairly is one of the most common sources of stress. (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015, p. 62)

Our interviews suggest that policing professionals are taking this mandate seriously. While we cannot make generalizations about the close to 18,000 different law enforcement agencies in the US from our sample (Banks, Hendrix, Hickman, & Kyckelhahn, 2016), it was clear that the majority of departments we spoke to reported that the department was intentionally trying to change the culture to become more accepting of seeking help for mental health concerns, with 85% of the comments reflecting less stigma.

The overall message of our interviews was mixed – the current state of the socio-political climate is generating an increase in fear and stress in police officers. The national narrative has impacted police officers at the local level, even when their department reports having a good relationship with the community. There is no sign that this trend is changing, and its impact on officer wellness, decision-making, and retention has not been empirically assessed. There is also an urgent and recognized need in the field to improve officer wellness through multiple mechanisms. This message is permeating departments while many professional groups and government programs are taking up the cause, as evidenced by the safety and wellness initiatives from both the US Department of Justice and other professional associations (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2017; Community Oriented Policing Services, 2017; International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2017). Similarly, many non-profit organizations are also specifically serving the law enforcement community.

Unfortunately, research offers little empirical guidance for police departments looking to address stress in their department; however, there is a great deal of research conducted in other settings. Other industries have found that organizational approaches to stress mitigation are more effective when coupled with individual-level interventions, which equip people with the knowledge, skills, and resources to cope with stressful conditions (Noblet & LaMontagne, 2006; Tetrick & Winslow, 2015). Relaxation and Mindfulness have been found to reduce stress levels in healthy people (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Van der Klink, Blonk, Schene, & Van Dijk, 2001). It also impacts other aspects of resiliency including reduced ruminative thinking, decreased anxiety, increased empathy, and self-compassion. For example, employees are taught to become aware of negative thoughts or irrational beliefs and to substitute positive or rational ideas (Bellarosa & Chen, 1997). Meditation, relaxation, and deep-breathing interventions are designed to enable employees to reduce adverse reactions to stresses by bringing about a physical and/or mental state that is the physiological opposite of stress. These interventions that are based in cognitive behavioral techniques are considered to be the most effective, although training in meditation, relaxation, and biofeedback are also used (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009).

Within law enforcement and other first responder populations, special consideration must also be given to the suite of approaches that fall under the umbrella of “Critical Incident Management Stress Management,” which can include debriefings after a particularly traumatic event to process the event and

reflect on its impact. One of the most highly regarded studies on psychological debriefing found that it may, paradoxically, increase psychological distress (Rose, Bisson, Churchill, & Wessely, 2002). There have been several studies on this topic, and the results are contradictory, with some findings positive outcomes particularly with first responders (Bledsoe, 2003; Garner, 2008; Tuckey & Scott, 2014). Departments significantly differ in what types of events require a CISM, who should attend, how long it will be, if it includes mental health professionals, and what is included. At this time, CISM is still considered to be a best practice in law enforcement, but its actual implementation varies widely across departments.

According to Ramchand and colleagues (2018), departments offer a wide range of services to promote coping with stressors including basic mental health services through their Employee Assistance Program, a formalized process to respond to critical incidents, and stress reduction training. Some departments also offer more proactive services including processes for proactively identifying people at risk, in-house mental health care, embedded chaplains within the workforce, substance abuse services for law enforcement, peer support programs, and suicide prevention/mental health promotion integrated into day-to-day operations. The effectiveness of most of these services within the law enforcement environment has yet to be evaluated, but many of these approaches are aligned with best practices that have been identified in the literature with other populations. These multipronged approaches include raising awareness about mental health problems and promoting self-care, identifying individuals at high risk, facilitating access to quality care, providing quality care, and restricting access to lethal means when off duty. See Ramchand and colleagues (2018) for a discussion and evaluation of mental health, wellness, and suicide prevention services in law enforcement departments.

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