

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Within this chapter, the researcher will be looking at existing academic literature which details research already conducted regarding the mental health of police officers and existing support structures already in place. The researcher will be critically analysing and evaluating the existing research to provide greater context. Within the literature review the researcher will be looking for research related to the following research objectives:

- To investigate how officers cope with operational and organisational stressors.
- To determine how long officers have been in the role of a response officer.
- To determine the types of incidents response officers attend.
- To analyse the number of officers considering leaving response for another department or considering leaving the role of a police officer entirely due to suffering with mental health conditions as a result of their role as a response officer.

The literature examined will be obtained by the researcher through UWTSD's online library, as well as through Google Scholar, to allow for a wide variety of research to be conducted and examined. Searches will be conducted using terms such as: "Police Officer", "Mental Health", "Operational and Organisational Stressors", "Support Systems", and "Retention".

Although the main focus of this literature review will be of existing academic literature, the researcher will also be noting gaps in existing research in which the researcher aims to fill with this research project. This will help guide the researcher when developing their study.

2.2 Mental Health and Police Officers

Demou et al. (2020) conducted face-to-face and telephone interviews with 30 Superintendents with the aim of the study being to understand the mental health issues and risk associated with this in officers and police staff in Police Scotland. These Superintendents were recruited through Police Scotland. They outline that this target group of officers are "exposed to many traumatic incidents; have experience of the demands and risk factors in the lower police ranks, experience high levels of demand; and are likely to line-manage more junior staff" (pp. 704). A limitation of this research is that although officers of this rank have experienced the demands and risk factors in the lower ranks, it may have been some time since they have done so and may not reflect the demands placed on those officers today. It also does not specify the gender of those interviewed. The research also states that the majority of Superintendents serving in Police Scotland are between 46 to 50 years of age which highlights again that their experiences may not reflect that of those serving in the lower ranks currently.

This research states that following analysis of the interviews, there is a complex series of issues around the mental health of officers and staff – highlighting the underreporting of mental health issues, experiences of PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Demou et al., 2020). It also notes how the stigma associated with mental health is still high and prevents officers from disclosing or opening up about how they are feeling. Demou et al have shown that there is a requirement for any future intervention strategies need to acknowledge police culture and how they can assist officers; however the research does not provide any recommendations on how this may be achieved.

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Hakik and Langlois (2020) conducted a qualitative analysis of government documents and news articles from across Canada to “determine whether a relationship could be identified with the existing police culture and how it stigmatizes any mention of mental health” (pp. 118). It is stated that negative features of police culture are additional barriers to officers seeking support for their mental health. The researchers note how stigma can be both self and public which can again provide additional barriers to seeking and receiving assistance. A strength of this research is that the articles selected by looking at the relevance by the date published, and whether the article referenced the key words inputted into Google by the researcher.

Hakik and Langlois (2020) note that the use of qualitative content analysis is ideal for textual data and opens up the avenue of interpretation – allowing for greater understanding. A limitation of this is that an individual’s language may differ slightly to another participant and that could cause ambiguity when trying to categorise and analyse the responses to the interview questions. This research also does not look at one department within policing, but policing as a whole. It highlights that there is a need for more department-specific research to understand how those officers working in that specific role, cope with the stigmatism of mental health and police culture.

2.3 Police Officers and Coping with Stressors

Jackman et al. (2020) note that although there is substantial evidence which has been collated over a number of years (Brown and Campbell., 1990; Collins and Gibbs, 2003; and Houdmont, 2013), more work is required to develop an understanding of how stressors are being experienced. Within their study, it is noted that the Police Stress Questionnaire (McCreary and Thompson, 2006) consists of two subscales – the Operational Police Stress Questionnaire and the Organisational Police Stress Questionnaire. Jackman et al. note that state that the norms and cut-off values which were used to classify the stressors within their study were generated in Canadian officers. This causes a limitation in the research due to not being linked with officers within the UK and it cannot be known if the values generalised similarly. However, it is noted that a strength of the research is that it used police-specific measures rather than generic ones used for regular members of the public. Jackman et al. noted that there was a perception that “disclosure of mental health issues could have adverse career implications, with the potential repercussions cited as a barrier to disclosure” (pg. 383). The research makes recommendations for police forces to develop strategies to alter officer attitude towards mental health.

Research conducted by Soomro and Yanos (2018) examined the predictors of mental health stigma among police officers. Their research was conducted utilising an online survey. This is the same research method as the researcher in this project is going to utilise. The research states that the participant pool was 296 officers who were not recruited from the local police force due to “concern that the local department may not be comfortable with allowing their employees to participate in research” (pg. 77). The research pool ended up with officers nationally taking part in the survey. Although this is needed, there may be the requirement for a more focused study in that particular location to get a truer picture of what officers in a certain area are contending with. The research provides regions of ‘West’, ‘Midwest’, ‘Northeast’, and ‘South’ which can be open to interpretation by both participants and future researchers. This can be seen as a limitation of the research due to potential ambiguity. Within the research, Soomro and Yanos note findings that participants endorsed having significantly more stigma in relation to seeking help for their mental health.

Thornton and Herndon in 2015 conducted a study focusing on the functionality of emotion regulation of police officers, who have or have not experienced a critical incident whilst in work. This study consisted of 76 participants who are full-time police officers from two different agencies. It is stated that even though newer officers are less likely to have experienced a critical incident, they had a higher measure of emotion regulation difficulties, and concerns regarding emotional well-being (Thornton and Herndon, 2015). The research concludes that a key finding is that "11.8% of all participants were at risk for clinical concern for PTSD" (pg. 307) and is much higher than 6.8% of the general population. Only 1 in 13 participants indicated that they would voluntarily seek support which highlights concerns around how officers are coping with their mental health openly and in the background. This research has limitations as it focuses on 'career suburban police officers' which may miss a large demographic of officers.

2.4 Incidents Police Officers Attend

Within their research in 2018, Soomro and Yanos utilised the 'Critical Incident History Questionnaire for Police Officers' (CIHQ) and the 'Brief Trauma Questionnaire' (BTQ), to measure trauma exposure for the participants. Within their measures, they state that within the BTQ, all questions are 'yes' or 'no' answers, with those answering yes given the opportunity to answer further questions. This allows for the possible collection of qualitative data and allows officers to express how they are truly feeling. However the research does not tell the reader if the further questions were set answers or if they could be expanded on by the participant. The CIHQ is utilised by Soomro and Yanos to measure officers' collective exposure to traumatic experiences. This is done by assessing the frequency and severity of those incidents. Soomro and Yanos state that:

"the most commonly endorsed traumatic events on the BTQ included witnessing a situation in which someone was seriously injured, experiencing natural disasters, and experiencing natural disasters" (Pg. 179).

It is then discussed that within the CIHQ incidents specifically experienced during their role with "33% of the sample endorse[ing] being seriously injured intentionally at least once" (pg. 179) as well as 75% of participants seeing someone die in the line of duty (Soomro and Yanos, 2018). The CIHQ was developed by Weiss et al in 2001 and was utilised by Liberman et al. in a 2002 study into the routine occupational stress and psychological distress in police officers. This questionnaire was developed over 23 years ago and is still being utilised in recent research. It is a tried and tested research method which is still relevant for research currently being conducted.

Within policing, Gavin and Porter (2024) state that occupational stressors are classifiable as operational and organisational stressors. This research is very current as the questionnaire was conducted in 2023, with the article being published in 2024. This therefore provides a recent picture of how organisational and operational stressors are impacting the mental health of police officers. Within their research, Gavin and Porter state that they utilised both qualitative and quantitative questions to examine the mental health of police officers throughout Ireland, with the study being based on the ideology that mental health in police officers is a problematic issue. This allows for officers to openly express how they are feeling in their own words, as well as multiple choice questions with fixed answers which can be quantified. Gavin and Porter concluded their research by stating that the "operational stressors which impacted on the mental health of participants was exposure to trauma and public expectations" (pp. 8, 2024). They also concluded that organisationally, issues relating to management impacted the mental

health of officers. A strength of this research is that it builds on existing research into the mental health of police officers and how their mental health is impacted by organisational and operational stressors.

2.5 Police Officer Retention and links with Mental Health

In 2024, Hernandez-Orellana conducted research into the retention of police officers by assessing which factors impacted that officer's decision to end or consider ending their career. Hernandez-Orellana obtained the perspectives of current and former officers through interviews. Hernandez-Orellana (2024) utilised a qualitative approach when conducting these interviews as it allowed for flexibility to ask follow-up questions. A strength of this method is that it allows for clarification and elaboration on specific topics by the participant. This research was conducted with fourteen participants, which Hernandez-Orellana (2020) states that ten of which were current officers from one police department, and four former officers from varying police departments. A limitation of this participant pool is that the researcher does not state what specific role these individuals hold within the police department and if they work on 'patrol'.

The interview consisted of eleven open-ended questions in relation to occupational stressors, coping mechanisms, and developing opportunities which allowed the researcher to gain a deeper level of understanding of how officers are dealing with their mental health. An improvement of this research could entail adding a mixture of quantitative questions, allowing for the participant to provide answers with a lower chance of identifying individuals from those answers.

One of the main strengths of this research is how recent it is being published in 2024. This research highlights that there are still improvements that need to be made, even though previous research (Soomro and Yanos, 2018; Demou et al., 2020) has highlighted similar concerns.

In 2004, Cooper and Ingram conducted a study on behalf of the Home Office, looking at the retention of police officers. A key finding of this research was that the police service in England and Wales have increasing rates of resignation, with a high proportion of probationary officers resigning due to the pressure and nature of the role. This research was conducted with ten police forces – six of which with high or increasing levels of resignations. It utilised a detailed questionnaire with three-hundred leavers and transferees from the ten forces taking part. A strength of this questionnaire is that it "included prompted, unprompted, and open-ended questions" (pp.) allowing for different types of data to be collected and analysed.

In their findings, Cooper and Ingram (2004) note that nearly one-third of participants stated that bullying and/or discrimination were relevant to their decision to resign. It is also noted that 23% of resigners stated that they had been personally subjected to bullying. These findings are concerning and is almost certain to have a negative impact on that individual officer's mental health although this is not covered within the research.

This research is now twenty years old and therefore highlights the lack of research conducted around the retention of police officers. It also does not discuss the specific job roll held by the participants at the time of their resignation / transfer. The research also does not show any discussion or consideration around how mental health can also impact retention rates within the police forces in England and Wales.

2.6 Conclusion

Throughout this literature review, the researcher has noted previous research linked with the mental health of police officers. A highly researched area is the topic of stigmatisation and its links to policing culture. Stigma and mental health in policing is still prevalent today and more work is required to educate police officers and staff in order for a reduction to take place.

It is clear that police officers are more likely to attend traumatic and/or critical incidents during their career than members of the public which has a negative impact on their mental health. Officers face occupational and organisational stressors daily however although some are the same for all those employed in the police service, certain stressors such as attending traumatic incidents may be increased in those working in the role of the response officer.

The researcher has observed that there are insufficient levels of research conducted into how police officers working in the role of a response officer / patrol officer specifically cope with their mental health, which is a gap this research will aim to fill.

A high number of articles read during this literature review highlight the need for coping mechanisms for police officers which ranges from family and friends to alcohol and even controlled substances in extreme cases. Further research is required to see how successful these coping mechanisms are for police officers.

To conclude, further research is required in relation to the retention of police officers and how this can be directly linked to the mental health of those officers. Although there is existing research in this area, more current research is required to see how current police officers are being impacted, and specifically, those working in response policing.

Word Count - 2543

2.7 Bibliography

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