

This literature review is being conducted with the aim to provide a more comprehensive and in-depth review into the key factors that have a detrimental effect on the mental health and wellbeing of frontline police officers due to the ever increasing demand that has been placed upon them in recent times. In doing so the author will be conducting an independent study to establish the core of the issue.

The author has chosen to undertake research into this topic as it is one that has personal meaning to them as they themselves have experienced the mental strain that is placed upon police officers in today's modern times.

The author feels this is a topic that is close to their heart as they are fully aware of the difficulties that are placed upon mental health within law enforcement and how this crucial topic is not openly discussed enough due to the stigma that is attached to talking about one's mental health issues.

The objective of this review is to highlight that although there is a vast amount of research that has already been conducted from various international law enforcement agencies, none truly delve deep enough into the common themes that are present and offer up a working strategy that can be implemented, to not only remedy and effect improve the mental wellbeing of their own officers but can be shared globally.

The core aspects that shall be explored and critically evaluated will document how workplace demand placed upon officers, if left untreated will inevitably lead to an increased state of emotional and mental strain that will not only negatively affect the officers professional life but also cross into their personal life and have a much broader impact on the individuals around them both professional and personally.

Whilst undertaking extensive research on the topic chosen, the author found studies that have already been conducted by several authors. The sources that have been utilised throughout this review have been chosen from academic books, journal articles and previous research studies.

One such source material that the author found to be of particular interest has been conducted by Ellison (2004). The primary focus of the research conducted within the book focuses on the causes of stress amongst police officers and the coping mechanisms used to implement successful stress management, stress can manifest itself in many ways and as such each individual will exhibit different signs of mental stress. Ellison (2004) has said “*Studies of the relative stressfulness of a variety of events and of the possibility that pressures may add up to create problems have occupied a substantial place in the literature on stress over the last 30 years*”.

Ellison (2004) states “*Stress refers to an observable response to an external or internal stimulus or situation, both physiological responses, such as sweating palms, increased adrenaline flow, and more behavioural ones such as yelling and cursing or other aggressive responses*”.

Ellison highlights and discusses several key attributes that they feel contribute to the overall stresses experienced by Police officers, such as the stresses experienced by officers can often be role dependant and how officers from different departments will of course experience high levels of work place stress but from different sources. Ellison (2004) claims “*Although in general the job of a manager is less stressful than that of workers at the bottom of the organisation ladder, at least one study has found that people who are responsible for other people have higher blood pressure and serum cholesterol levels*”.

Whilst Ellison explores the fact that different officers will have different sources for stress, they also explore that there are many factors of stress that share a common theme throughout

regardless of role and rank. Ellison explains that there are universal stressors that will impact the overall negative mental health of officers such as the pressures of everyday personal life that undoubtedly impact work place life, how having poor working relationships with colleagues can lead to further stress and a how a common cause of stress by many is how out of touch senior staff have become and how far removed they are from remembering what it is actually like to work on the frontline, Ellison (2004) will say *“Stress at work also comes from poor relationships with superiors, colleagues, and subordinates”*.

A critical point that is addressed by Ellison highlights how younger in service officers may be experiencing stress due to their expectations not being met, Ellison (2004) states *“The person does not know what is expected of him, what behaviour will bring reward or punishment. Role ambiguity is sometimes heightened by discrepancies between the official job description and the reality of the work one is asked to do. It is a frequent complaint of police officers”*.

Ellison also highlights the issues present in the gathering of data and explains that while the research carried out in previous studies has been useful in one respect, often the participants chosen have far too many variables in place, such as personal firmness which shows a continued lack of consistency as each person deals with stress differently, Ellison (2004) says *“He’s strong; he can take anything, he goes to pieces over the least little problem. Comments of this sort spotlight the common belief that there are large individual differences in the way of people handle pressure”*.

Ellison also states that often the participants of these independent studies are carried out by a small number of anyone who is willing to volunteer which doesn’t yield the best results, Ellison (2004) has said *“The number of subjects in most studies tends to be relatively small. These subjects seldom are chosen randomly, with everyone having an equal chance of being chosen. Much more commonly, researches will take anyone who is willing to participate”*.

Within this book it also documents a potential weakness and identifies a gap in the research stating that although there is a vast amount of studies conducted, the majority have been carried out amongst American Law enforcement agencies, in addition the studies have been aimed towards larger forces, Ellison (2004).

In contrast to this Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) claimed *“Another limitation stems from a lack of research on mental health stigma in police officers in the USA. Most research regarding police officer mental health care occurs in European countries”*. This is a contradiction, and both are stating conflicting facts.

Similarly another recent study conducted on stress and coping strategy that has been carried out by The Police Federation (No date) explains that mental health issues are an increasing concern for forces as due to a number of contributors such as budget cuts and the increased pressures placed upon officers, mental health is drastically on the rise. The Police federation (No date) state *“The unprecedented cuts to the police service have meant that officers are under more strain now than ever before as officers are being asked to do more and more with fewer resources and while they have risen admirably to the challenge it is inevitable that the increased pressures they’re facing will have an impact on them mentally”*.

This is supportive of the findings previously discussed by Ellison and is a common theme throughout the review conducted by the author.

The study highlights that officers are placed under far too much stress than they can effectively deal with, which in turn will have an adverse effect on that individual’s mental health. Both parties have successfully been able to identify that workplace stress is a key component that impacts negatively upon mental health.

To the credit of the Police federation they have taken the bold step to attempt to tackle the ongoing issue and in doing so have implemented a coping strategy in the form of the Nine point stress plan. Police Federation (No Date).

In addition to this the Police federation has conducted an independent study in the form of a survey from a field of 17,000 participants focusing on mental health, the eligibility to partake in the survey required individuals to be a member of the police federation thus ensuring the data collated would be accurate. The study revealed that 39% of officers have sought some form of support for their mental health issues, which of course highlights the need for an effective strategy to be implemented, Police Federation (No Date).

This study was carried out on a voluntary basis by members of the Police Federation and in doing so negates two of the concerns that was previously raised by Ellison (2004) when conducting survey participants as this one was conducted with a vast number of participants who took the time and effort to voice their concerns thus ensuring solid feedback as opposed to a small number of participants who had no interest in the topic.

A statistic that particularly stood out from the survey uncovered that 65% of officers still made the decision to go into work knowing that they're mental state was not as it should be, Police Federation (No Date) stated *"More than a quarter of officers who have taken sick leave attributed it to stress, depression or anxiety, while 65% said they still went to work even though they felt they shouldn't have because of the state of their mental wellbeing"*.

This article also highlighted a key weakness that is present throughout the review of the stigma attached to seeking support for mental health and one that is not spoken about enough of how supervisors are not being given adequate levels of training to support the officers who do come seeking support, Police Federation (No date) will say *"Equally concerning, 73% of managers*

said they had not been given any training on how to support a colleague who was having difficulties with mental health and wellbeing”.

A comparative study conducted by the University of Cambridge (No Date) delved deeper into the ongoing impact of continuous workplace stress and was able to uncover some alarming statistics whilst reconfirming the earlier findings. Whereas the previous findings talked about the causes of stress, little was discussed about the long-term effect of being under such a state of stress will result in.

The study found that one in five officers have some form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that has resulted from work related exposure to the countless traumatic experiences that are encountered whilst on duty. Cambridge University (No date) have described PTSD as *“PTSD is an anxiety disorder in which traumatic or life-threatening events cause disturbing memories to recur as well as intense states of hypervigilance”.*

Cambridge University (No date) go on to claim *“The research team found that 90% of police workers who responded had been exposed to trauma. Of these, one in five reported experiencing either PTSD or Complex PTSD symptoms in the past four weeks”.*

This is again a common theme and one of the most important that has been uncovered throughout this review

The study also provides a valuable insight into the requirement for officers to be able to have the time and opportunity to decompress and comprehend the incident after dealing with traumatic incidents, this is an underutilised coping mechanism and if improvements are to be made in the future to safeguard officers mental health needs to be explored far more in depth to showcase the strengths of doing so.

Cambridge University (No Date) claim *“Dealing with disturbing experiences is a defining part of policing, but employees have a right to expect resources to protect them from the impact of daily trauma exposure. Without such resources in place, the cost to policing and public safety will just mount up. Over half of our respondents said they had insufficient time to process incidents before being sent back out on the next call”*.

As previously discovered in the concerns raised by Ellison (2004) with regards to surveys, each person has different tolerance levels when it comes to dealing with trauma, and as such a one size fits all approach is not fit for purpose. Without tailored intervention, time to comprehend the situation and support after traumatic incidents the cases of PTSD amongst officers will only increase due to lack of understanding and as discussed throughout lack of engagement on behalf of the officer themselves, Cambridge University (No Date) go on to say *“A stiff upper lip attitude will not work in contemporary policing, without decent interventions and monitoring for trauma impact, and a national conversation involving the Home Office and Department of Health, the alarming levels of PTSD our study has uncovered will stay the same”*.

With this in mind the levels of PTSD being five times higher than the UK average demonstrates the immense pressure that officers are under. More alarmingly over two thirds of the statistic are completely unaware that they are suffering some form of PTSD due to the lack of support, knowledge and stigma that goes with mental health, University of Cambridge (No Date).

Data from two studies thus far in this review have been able to identify a link between officers' willingness to arrive at work when their wellbeing is a concern, Cambridge university (No Date) state *“Two-thirds of all respondents to “The Job, The Life” said they had a mental health issue directly resulting from police work. Yet almost all the survey’s respondents – some 93%*

– said they would go to work as usual if suffering from psychological issues such as stress or depression”.

Cambridge University unfortunately offer no explanation as to why these officers take it upon themselves to put their job before their own personal wellbeing but in doing so this highlights the immense sense of purpose and dedication to their role, alternately with the data uncovered from this review it is just as likely that officers will not place themselves under scrutiny and be viewed as weak by their peers for having sick leave to deal with their mental health issues, Cambridge University (No Date) will say *“The study does not surprise me and it provides evidence to support investment in prevention as well as acute services, With stigma around mental health slowly reducing we are seeing hidden issues emerging such as high levels of stress and trauma impact, which can contribute to escalation if they aren’t addressed.”*

This again ties into the uncovered by Ellison (2004) which states that having poor relationships with colleagues can and will lead to further stresses, Cambridge University (No date) likewise have said *“There were also suggestions that budget cuts to policing have exacerbated mental health problems. Policing requires teamwork, colleagues around for support, that’s no longer the case and has not been for several years”*.

This data gathered for this entry was conducted by means of an online survey, comparatively both the Police Federation (No Date) and Ellison (2004) have chosen this approach due to the fact this methodology has a vast number of advantages such as an increased response rate due to the participants being able to conduct the survey on their own timescale. In addition to this the lack of an interviewer makes the survey seem less formal and allows participants to openly speak.

Ball (2019) claims *“The advantages of online surveys include speed and reach, ease, cost, flexibility, and automation. An online survey can be rapidly deployed and completed by*

participants. Completion of survey questionnaires online is often preferred by respondents, who can answer at their convenience and at their own pace, which may increase response rates”.

However, with every strength identified there is always a weakness that is present depending on the participants viewpoints. When conducting online surveys there is always the risk that the participant is merely clicking any answer to finish the survey quickly which will negatively impact the end results. Also, a factor to consider is the questions posed may not be understood by the participant and without the presence of an interviewer to clarify and probe into the responses vital data may be lost.

Ball (2019) goes on to say *“The lack of an interviewer can be a disadvantage in online surveys as open ended question responses cannot be explored with immediate follow up questions and there is no scope for respondents to seek clarification of unfamiliar or ambiguous terms. On the other hand, deceptive practises, e. g participants providing duplicate responses, submitting fraudulent information, or deliberately making erroneous responses may occur particularly in the surveys on the topic with respondents have strong feelings”.*

As with the survey conducted by the Police Federation (No Date) the pool of applicants were within the thousands based on a voluntary basic, again this negates the concern raised previously by Ellison (2004) that a small pool of participants will not yield the best results.

A considerable amount of research has been published on the fact that frontline police officers inevitably will suffer various forms of stress when carrying out their daily duties, Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) both claim *“Police officers encounter dangerous situations and risk their lives as a component of their jobs. Officers who experience elevated levels of stress have an increased risk of mental health consequences, particularly depression, anxiety, burnout, somatization and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)”.*

However there has been relatively little literature published in comparison with regards the stigma associated as to why police officers feel as if they are immune to PTSD or why they see seeking help and support for such issues as a show of weakness, Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) will say *“When analysing a police culture, it is evident that officers unknowingly advocate negative attitudes about seeking mental health support based on the organizational stigma”*.

A study conducted by Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) critically analyses the link between mental health and the reluctance of officers to seek help for these matters. Both authors explain that officers are extremely unwilling to seek support and guidance for issues pertaining from Mental health, the author in this case provides exceptional insight by providing several examples of why officers are so reluctant.

Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) state that it is common knowledge that police officers are unwilling to seek support, unlike similar studies that simply explain the situation both explore the possible causes for such a stigma to develop and in doing so have uncovered several possible hypothesis as why this is occurs within all ranks of law enforcement, Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) state *“This suggestion of stigma supports that seeking mental health services may also be associated with being “weak” or going against social expectations as to the perceived role of a police officer”*.

Again both illuminate that a negative perception towards seeking support for Mental health can be as a result of learnt behaviour from more senior peers, as such younger in service officers will in turn rebel against seeking support as they will be heavily influenced by others which unknowably causes a domino effect as that new officer will one day be passing the same biased opinion onto the next. Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) stated *“The development of negative perceptions comes from years of immersion into a culture where younger recruits are trained*

and guided by veteran police officers with maladaptive perceptions, maladaptive perception is a problem because the stigma becomes normalized and newer police officers continue to operate with a skewed perspective”.

Importantly both are able to identify and effectively explain a common theme that has briefly been touched upon by both Ellison (2004) and The University of Cambridge (No date) and perhaps the most simplistic, honest reflection that has been documented in any study, that the main factor that officers are so unwilling to seek help is that the job and society has deemed obtaining support for mental health is a weakness.

When coupled with the study completed by Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) that found men are more likely to suffer from PTSD this from the authors point of view is the main obstacle present. With so many men suffering with their mental health and the role of a police officer and the environment in general being very male dominated with high levels of bravado exhibited this leads to a recipe for disaster. Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) both claim *“Historically, police subculture has consisted of values involving masculinity, independence and emotional control. Such values may make it difficult for police officers, mainly males, to express emotion or seek mental health treatment which places them at a disadvantage because internalizing their feelings may reflect in their work performance”.*

The purpose of this research was to review the current literature available to identify areas for improvement or analyse any gaps within the available literature. After analysing several key sources of information, it is clear to the author that although each offers its own perspective and interpretation on mental health, one common theme remains throughout is the stigma attached to receiving help and support for mental health and as such is a continued weakness that will continue despite any efforts made to combat mental health and wellbeing.

Officers are simply unwilling to discuss or seek help for any form of mental health struggles due to this factor, as the research shows the stresses that a frontline officer faces daily inevitably will take its toll, unfortunately due to the nature of the duties that must be carried out being exposed to stressful situations is unavoidable, Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) say *“Repeated exposure to distressing situations is an aspect that is unavoidable and may lead to a greater risk of developing a mental health disorder”*.

This is where if left unaddressed by both the individuals and organisation daily low level stresses will quickly manifest into serious concerns leading to emotional burnout and officers desperately trying to implement their own coping strategy that is ill equipped to support their requirements, Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) have said *“The coping strategies police officers develop suggest they often do not acknowledge or address their traumatic stress, which leads to the development of maladaptive coping mechanisms”*.

What this research has uncovered is that if the negative perception of seeking help for mental issues were normalised then the amount of officers suffering with PTSD would decrease rapidly if support could be implemented in a timely manner, Velazquez and Hernandez (2019) go on to say *“Continuing to address the stigma of seeking mental health support would allow officers to feel more comfortable about participating in services to talk about any trauma they may have experienced in their jobs”*.

The critical aspect that the author has found during the research is how little time officers receive to comprehend what has occurred in a stressful situation. Without this support officers are left to their own devices and as is human nature will replay the incident in their minds.

From the perspective of the author it has been clear to see that mental health can originate from various sources and no two cases will be alike as no two people are alike. As such when dealing with officers who bravely seek support, a tailored approach must be undertaken to ensure the

best support is offered. As for now police forces are ill equipped to deal with such matters and without receiving the necessary training will continue to underperform in this sector.

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