Managing on Multiple Fronts: Investigating Police Officer Stress

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Introduction

For decades, policing has been recognized to be one of the most stressful professions (Gershon et al., 2009; Karaffa et al., 2015). This is due to a variety of factors including: exposure to traumatic incidents (Kurtz, Zavala & Melander, 2015), rigid structure of police organizations (Hickman et al., 2010), shift work and long hours (Alexander & Walker, 1996), suicidal thoughts and actions (Swatt, Gibson & Piquero, 2007), suicide (Papazoglou, 2001), family strain (Miller, 2007), domestic violence (Roberts & Levenson, 2001) and family impairment (Miller, 2007). It is important to examine the implications of officer stress in order for police organizations to provide officers and their families with the necessary tools to maintain their physical, mental and emotional well being.

Critical Analysis

Stigmatization

Studies have shown that stigmatization surrounding police officer stress can have detrimental consequences to officer well being. In addition, it has been found that the police subculture supports values and norms such as solidarity, “us vs. them” mentality, isolation, and lack of sentimentality (Chopko, Palmeri & Adams, 2013; Miller, 2007). With that being said, officers may hide any signs of perceived weaknesses, such as mental illness, for fear of losing support from their peers or losing their jobs all together (Lamed, 2010). Incorporated in the police subculture is the “blue wall” or “code of silence” (Marin, 2012). This may further motivate officers to be loyal to the organization and forgo disclosure of underlying problems within police organizations (Marin, 2012). It is estimated that per every suicide, another thousand officers continue to suffer with PTSD in silence (Marin, 2012). Moreover, it has been found that officers tend to isolate themselves and rely solely on their peers for support (Karaffa et al., 2015). As a result, those suffering from mental illness are once again left to suppress their feelings for fear of stigmatization (Karaffa et al., 2015).

Criminal Justice Impact

Literature supports that police officers are hesitant to seek help for mental health issues (Naz et al., 2014). Although there are many resources available, one study found that only 25% of members use the services (Horan, Bochantin & Booth-Butterfield, 2012). Others may cope with stressors through the use of maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance abuse and aggression (Lamed, 2010). It is important to note that these forms of coping have been found to be accepted within the police subculture (Chopko, Palmeri & Adams, 2013). One implication of poorly managed or unresolved stressors in policing is turnover rates (Wareham, Smith & Lambert, 2013). Other implications are decreased social networks, insufficient and tired staff, as well as lowered morale (Wareham, Smith & Lambert, 2013). These factors can impact police productivity and may result in the community undermining the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies (Gershon et al., 2009).

Theoretical Framework

Robert Agnew’s General Strain Theory has been predominately recognized as a dominant and enduring theory (Moon & Johnson, 2012). Agnew argued that there are three types of strain (Menard & Arter, 2013). In addition, he argued that strain leads to negative affective states such as feelings of anger, depression or anxiety (Menard & Arter, 2013). As a result, individuals respond to the affective states through engaging in a variety of coping mechanisms (Swatt, Gibson & Piquero, 2007). Agnew found that there are three types of coping: cognitive, behavioral and emotional (Swatt, Gibson & Piquero, 2007). This process is illustrated in the diagram below:

Future Direction

When analyzing the findings in this study, it is clear that the stigmatization that lives within the police subculture is problematic. It is of the upmost importance to address the stigma and bring light to the issues that police officers face. It is important to note that these forms of coping have resulted in tragedies with many lives impacted by depression, PTSD, substance abuse and suicide. It is important that officers be taught early on in the recruitment process and through their defined career, that seeking help for mental health is just as important as getting treatment for physical health. It is recommended that officer mental health be a focal point in training. From recruitment to retirement, it is important that officers not only have the resources at their disposal, but that they understand the importance of taking care of their mental health. Moreover, it has been found that officers tend to isolate themselves and rely solely on their peers for support (Karaffa et al., 2015). As a result, those suffering from mental illness are once again left to suppress their feelings for fear of stigmatization (Karaffa et al., 2015). Moving forward, it is also recommended that there be changes in recognizing suicide as a loss in the line of duty. Furthermore, if officers were able to receive treatment and return to work after mental health issues, it would make it all the more likely that those who need help would get help. This shift towards supporting police with mental health issues, would increase the well being of the officer, his/her family, and the communities that they police.

Research Questions

This study will seek to identify the sources of stress, and the subsequent implications of stress. The research question is: What are the most prevalent sources of stress in policing, and what are the potential negative consequences on the officer, his/her families and the Criminal Justice System? The first hypothesis is that stress will shift work and overtime are associated with higher levels of police stress. Secondly, it is hypothesized that organizational factors and the police subculture contribute to higher officer stress. The final hypothesis is that exposure to traumatic incidents and the use of maladaptive coping mechanisms have a substantially negative impact officer well being.

Conclusion

Police officers risk their lives on a daily basis to serve and protect members of the communities they work for and some, communities in which they live. As a result of stressors from the job itself and the organization, officers may find themselves in vulnerable situations. It is essential that police stress is prevalent and can result in the use of maladaptive coping mechanisms. With that being said, there are significant issues with the police subculture that have severe implications. The stigmatization of mental health issues in policing has resulted in devastating consequences. Officers may be left to suffer through PTSD, depression, substance abuse, and suicide ideation. This stigmatization is destructive and does not allow for progression in coping with officer stress. Communities may question the legitimacy of their police organizations. Families may face periods of instability or fall apart. Officers may be left to suffer through PTSD, depression, substance abuse, and suicide ideation. This stigmatization is destructive and does not allow for progression in coping with officer stress. Communities may question the legitimacy of their police organizations.

References


#References

Limitations

There are several limitations with the research in this study. One of the most prevalent limitation is responder bias. Fear of reprisal has been found to be a significant factor in officer non-disclosure of mental health issues (Barron, 2010). As a result, it is likely that the numbers that have been reported across police literature are fairly low and non-representative of the police organization. An example of this limitation is data on suicide. Not only is it difficult to obtain, but it may be highly unreliable. In fact, it has been estimated that approximately 17% of police suicides are misclassified due to mental health stigma, potential insurance ramifications, and the persistent goal to preserve an officer’s reputation (Barron, 2010). Given the complex issue of confidentiality in police research, many of the studies may have skewed results and thus lack the ability to capture raw numbers.